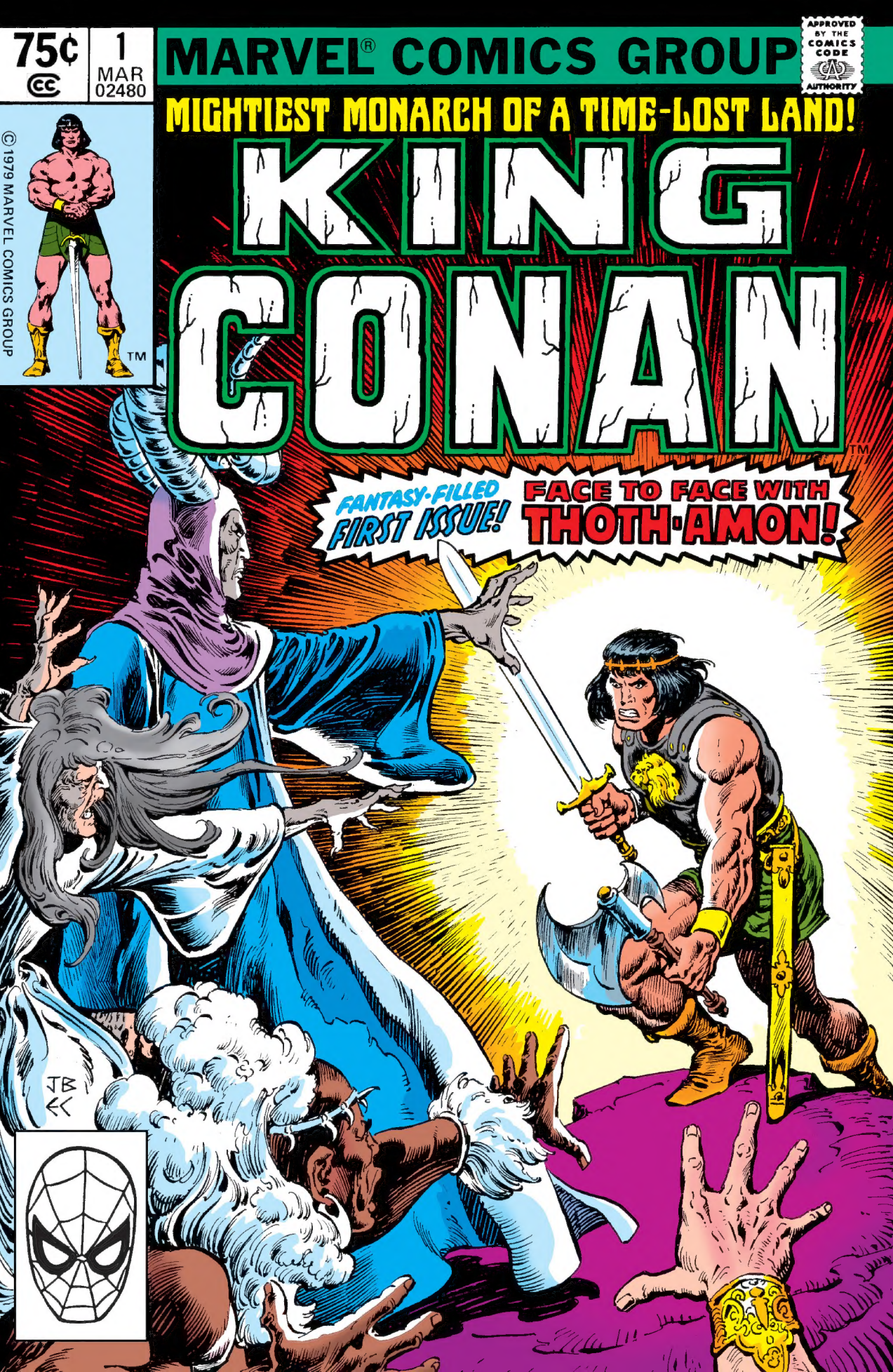
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MARVEL® COMICS GROUP
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MIGHTIEST MONARCH OF A TIME-LOST LAND!
KING CONAN™
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FANTASY-FILLED FIRST ISSUE!
FACE TO FACE WITH THOTH-AMON!
JB

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"KNOW, O PRINCE, THAT THE MAN CALLED CONAN WAS **ALL THINGS** IN HIS DAY, AFTER HE HAD WANDERED SOUTH FROM THE SNOW-CAPPED HILLS OF HIS NATIVE CIMMERIA:

"FIRST A **THIEF**, WITH MORE COURAGE THAN SKILL... THEN A **SOLDIER OF FORTUNE** IN MORE NATIONS AND WITH MORE ARMIES THAN MOST MEN CAN COUNT...

"... AYE, EVEN A **PIRATE** MORE THAN ONCE, FIRST WITH THE SHE-CORSAIR BÊLIT, LATER WITH BOTH THE BLOODY BARACHANS AND THE BUCCANEERS OF ZINGARA.

"THEN, IN HIS **FIFTH DECADE** HE SLEW A VICIOUS TYRANT AND BECAME **KING IN AQUILONIA**, PROUDEST KINGDOM OF THE VIOLENT HYBORIAN AGE.

"IN TIME, HE TOOK A **WIFE**: THE FAIR **ZENOBIA**, AS GENTLE OF SPEECH AS HE WAS SWIFT OF SWORD, YET POSSESSED OF AN INNER WILL OF IRON.

"THE ELDEST OF HIS CHILDREN WAS A **SON**, LIKEWISE NAMED CONAN... BUT MORE USUALLY KNOWN BY HIS SOBRIQUET OF **CONN**.

"ALL THE WESTERN WORLD DID DO THEM HOMAGE... FOR NOW, AT LAST, THE LION OF AQUILONIA HAD A CUB... AN **HEIR**.

"AND IT WAS WHEN YOUNG CONN HAD SEEN SOME **TWELVE SUMMERS** THAT THE BROODING, DARKSOME **EVIL** CAME WAFTING FROM BOTH NORTH AND SOUTH... TO BLOW LIKE A **NOXIOUS WIND** ACROSS THE FACE OF THE LAND...!"

The WITCH OF THE MISTS

ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY *L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP* AND *LIN CARTER*
FEATURING THE HERO CREATED BY *ROBERT E. HOWARD*

THE SUN, HIDDEN BY THE HEAVY OVERCAST, IS NEARING THE WESTERN HORIZON WHEN THE RIDER ON THE GRAY MARE EMERGES FROM THE FOREST, TO JOIN **KING CONAN OF AQUILONIA** IN THE MIST-SOAKED CLEARING...

NO SIGN OF THE **YOUNG PRINCE** BACK ALONG THE **TRAIL**, YOUR MAJESTY.

IS IT POSSIBLE THE LAD HAS RIDDEN **AHEAD**, ON THE SCENT OF THE **WHITE STAG** WE ALL SOUGHT?

IT'S **MORE** THAN POSSIBLE, PROSPERO.

THE FOOLISH CUB HAS INHERITED MORE THAN HIS SHARE OF HIS SIRE'S **THICKHEADEDNESS**.

IT WILL SERVE HIM RIGHT IF HE'S **BENIGHTED** IN THESE WOODS--ESPECIALLY IF THE THRICE-DAMNED **RAINS** BEGIN AGAIN!

SHALL I SUMMON THE **REST** OF THE PARTY, SIRE? 'TWERE NOT GOOD TO LET THE HEIR TO THE THRONE BE LOST IN THE FOREST OVERNIGHT, EVEN HERE IN **GUNDERLAND**.*

WE COULD **SPREAD OUT**, SOUNDING HORNS...!

NO, LET MY SON **BE**!

WE'LL ACCOUNT THIS PART OF THE LAD'S **EDUCATION**.

*GUNDERLAND= NORTHERN PROVINCE OF AQUILONIA. --ROY.

IF HE'S THE **STUFF OF KINGS**, A SLIGHT WETTING AND A SLEEPLESS NIGHT WILL BE NOTHING TO HIM!

WHY, WHEN **I** WAS HIS AGE, **MANY** WERE THE BLACK NIGHTS I SPENT IN THE CIMMERIAN HILLS, UNDER THE GLITTER OF THE STARS.

LET'S BACK TO **CAMP**. WE'VE LOST THE WHITE STAG--

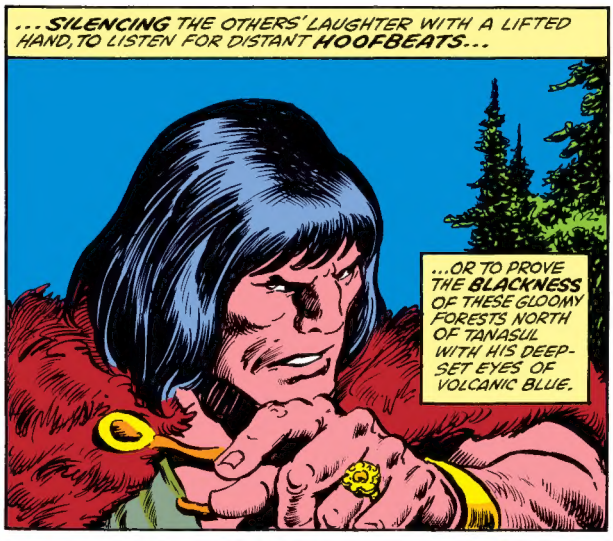
--BUT WE HAVE THE **BOAR** WE CAUGHT, AND YOUR KING IS **NIGH STARVED**!

THAT NIGHT, WINE LOOSENS THE BARBARIAN-BORN MONARCH'S TONGUE TO AN UNUSUAL DEGREE, AND **BAWDY ANECDOTES** FROM HIS LONG CAREER POUR FORTH...

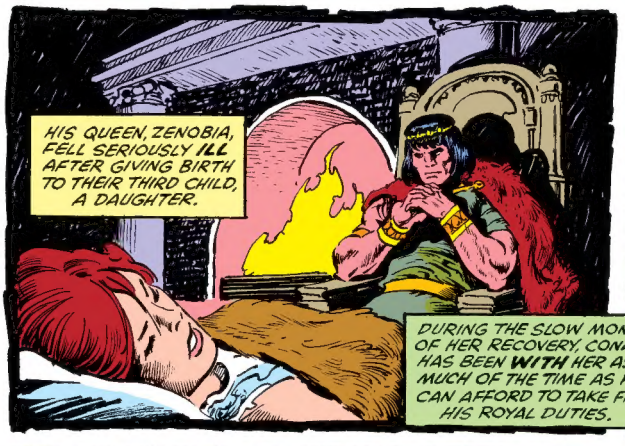
...SO THEN, NATURALLY, I **DUMPED** THE FAITHLESS WENCH FROM TWO STORIES HIGH INTO A **CESSPOOL**.

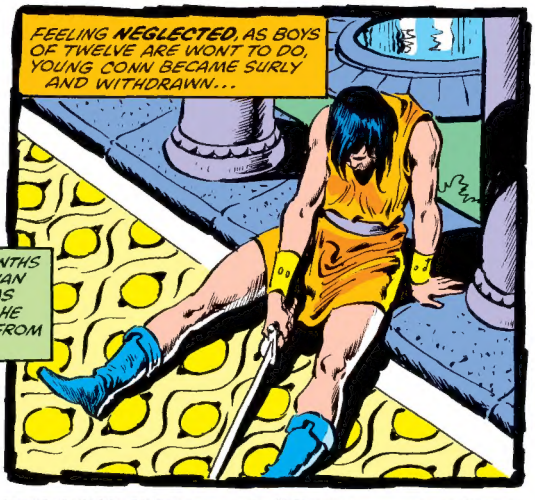
MAY CROM AND MITRA SKEWER ME WITH **LIGHTNING** IF I DIDN'T!

ALL THE SAME, PROSPERO NOTICES THAT, FROM TIME TO TIME, CONAN **CEASES** HIS FORCIBLY LIGHTHEARTED CAROUSING...

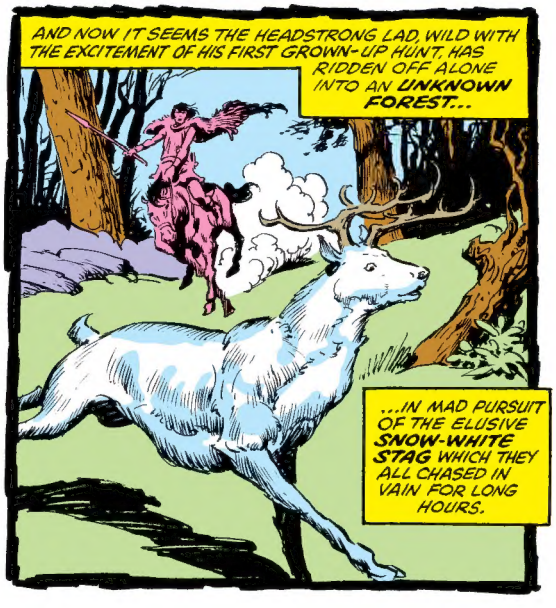

...SILENCING THE OTHERS' LAUGHTER WITH A LIFTED HAND, TO LISTEN FOR DISTANT HOOFBEATS...
...OR TO PROVE THE BLACKNESS OF THESE GLOOMY FORESTS NORTH OF TANASUL WITH HIS DEEP-SET EYES OF VOLCANIC BLUE.

PROSPERO KNOWS THAT, WHATEVER HIS EARLIER WORDS, CONAN IS FAR MORE WORRIED OVER PRINCE CONN'S FAILURE TO RETURN THAN HE WISHES KNOWN.
DOUBTLESS HE FEELS PANGS OF GUILT, SINCE THE HUNTING TRIP TO NORTHERN GUNDERLAND WAS HIS OWN IDEA.

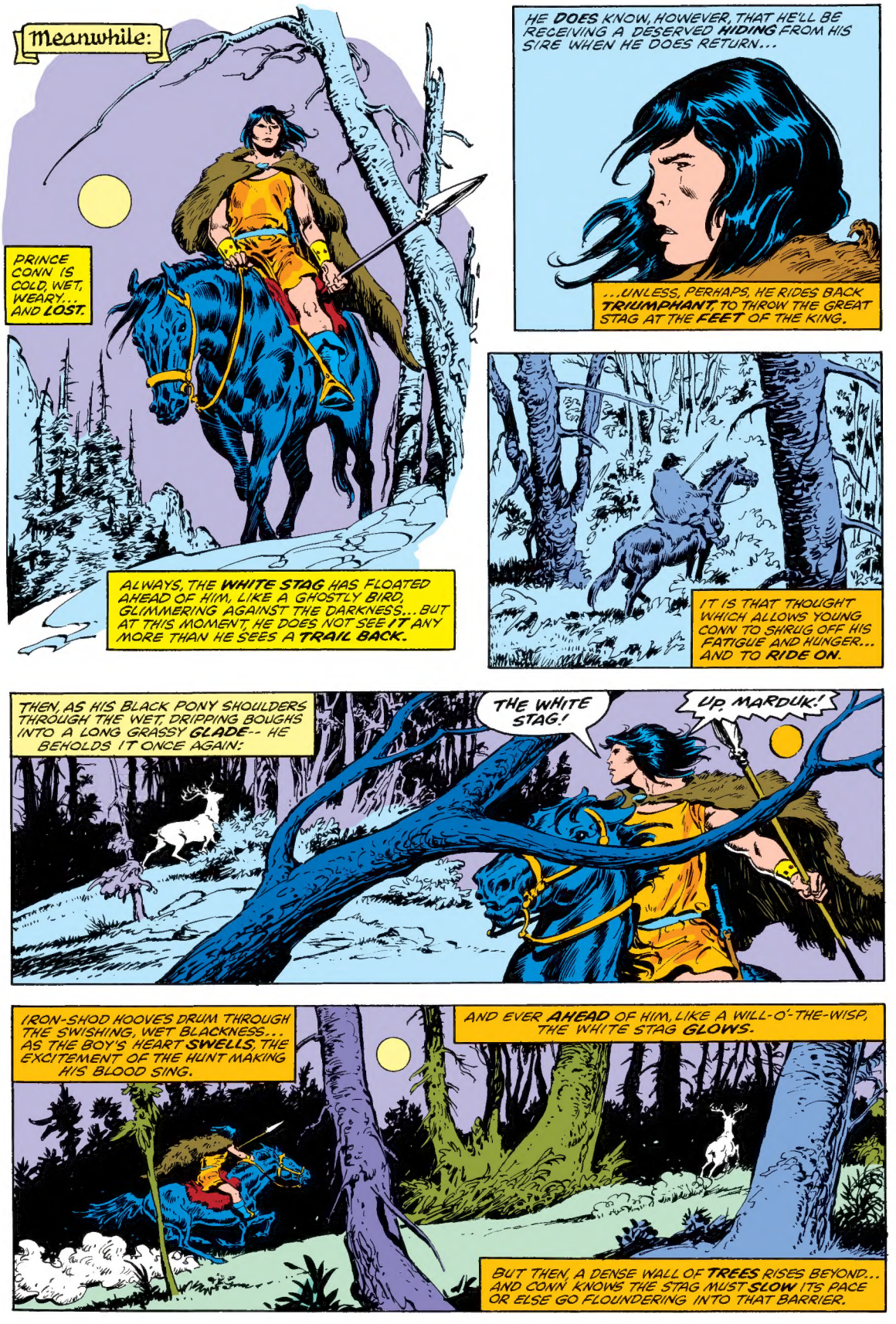

HIS QUEEN, ZENOBIA, FELL SERIOUSLY ILL AFTER GIVING BIRTH TO THEIR THIRD CHILD, A DAUGHTER.
DURING THE SLOW MONTHS OF HER RECOVERY, CONAN HAS BEEN WITH HER AS MUCH OF THE TIME AS HE CAN AFFORD TO TAKE FROM HIS ROYAL DUTIES.


FEELING NEGLECTED, AS BOYS OF TWELVE ARE WONT TO DO, YOUNG CONN BECAME SURLY AND WITHDRAWN...

THUS, NOW THAT ZENOBIA HAS REGAINED MUCH OF HER STRENGTH, AND DEATH'S DARK WINGS SEEM FAR FROM THE PALACE ONCE MORE...
...THE KING SUGGESTED A FEW WEEKS OF CAMPING AND HUNTING, HOPING TO FIND A NEW CLOSENESS TO HIS SON AND HEIR-APPARENT.


AND NOW IT SEEMS THE HEADSTRONG LAD, WILD WITH THE EXCITEMENT OF HIS FIRST GROWN-UP HUNT, HAS RIDDEN OFF ALONE INTO AN UNKNOWN FOREST...
...IN MAD PURSUIT OF THE ELUSIVE SNOW-WHITE STAG WHICH THEY ALL CHASED IN VAIN FOR LONG HOURS.

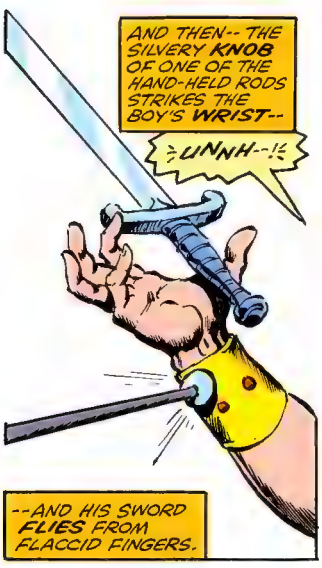
THEN, ABRUPTLY, THE SKY CLEARS... AND, BREAKING OFF IN THE MIDST OF A RAMBLING TALE OF HIS BUCCANEER DAYS, THE KING SNARLS...
CALL ME WOMAN-HEARTED IF YOU DARE, MAY CROM CURSE MY BONES--
--BUT I'LL SIT HERE NO LONGER!
WITH THIS BRIGHT MOON, I CAN FOLLOW A TRAIL OR I'M A STYGIAN.
SADDLE UP RED YMIR FOR ME; THE BLACK'S WINDED.
SIR VALENS! DISTRIBUTE THE TORCHES, AND LET'S FORTH!
I'LL NOT SLEEP TONIGHT TILL I KNOW MY BOY IS SAFE!
THOSE WHO JOURNEY WITH THE KING ARE NO FOOLS: THEY HAVE EXPECTED THIS OUTBURST FOR SOME TIME NOW.
NOR WOULD ANY OBJECT, EVEN IF HE COULD-- FOR PRINCE CONN IS MUCH BELOVED AMONG BOTH NOBLES AND SERVANTS OF KING CONAN'S COURT...
BUT, ALL KNOW THAT THERE BE OTHER MEN-- ROGUES, THIEVES, AND RENEGADES, WHO OFTEN TAKE TO THE WILDS -- AYE, NOT TO MENTION GREAT BEARS AND GRAY WOLVES HERE IN GUNDERLAND.
WHEN I FIND THAT UNLICKED CUB, I'LL BEAT HIS PANTS FOR PULLING US FROM A WARM FIRE!
JUST THEN, A SNOW-WHITE OWL-- AN OMEN OF SORTS-- FLOATS ACROSS THE MOON'S FULL FACE.
HOO HOO HOO
WHAT THE DEVIL--?
AND, EVEN AS HE RIDES, CONAN RECALLS HIS OWN PEOPLE'S WHISPERED TALES OF A WHITE WERE-STAG, SWIFT AS THE WINTER WIND.
PRAY CROM IT'S NOT SUCH A DEMON-THING HIS FIRSTBORN SON HAS PURSUED INTO THE NIGHT-SHROUDED FOREST.


Meanwhile:
PRINCE CONN IS COLD, WET, WEARY... AND LOST.
ALWAYS, THE WHITE STAG HAS FLOATED AHEAD OF HIM, LIKE A GHOSTLY BIRD, GLIMMERING AGAINST THE DARKNESS... BUT AT THIS MOMENT, HE DOES NOT SEE IT ANY MORE THAN HE SEES A TRAIL BACK.
HE DOES KNOW, HOWEVER, THAT HE'LL BE RECEIVING A DESERVED HIDING FROM HIS SIRE WHEN HE DOES RETURN...
...UNLESS, PERHAPS, HE RIDES BACK TRIUMPHANT, TO THROW THE GREAT STAG AT THE FEET OF THE KING.
IT IS THAT THOUGHT WHICH ALLOWS YOUNG CONN TO SHRUG OFF HIS FATIGUE AND HUNGER... AND TO RIDE ON.
THEN, AS HIS BLACK PONY SHOULDERS THROUGH THE WET, DRIPPING BOUGHS INTO A LONG GRASSY GLADE-- HE BEHOLDS IT ONCE AGAIN:
THE WHITE STAG!
UP, MARDUK!
IRON-SHOD HOOVES DRUM THROUGH THE SWISHING, WET BLACKNESS... AS THE BOY'S HEART SWELLS, THE EXCITEMENT OF THE HUNT MAKING HIS BLOOD SING.
AND EVER AHEAD OF HIM, LIKE A WILL-O'-THE-WISP, THE WHITE STAG GLOWS.
BUT THEN, A DENSE WALL OF TREES RISES BEYOND... AND CONN KNOWS THE STAG MUST SLOW ITS PACE OR ELSE GO FLOUNDERING INTO THAT BARRIER.

A FEW MOMENTS MORE, AND THE LITHE PRINCE FLINGS BACK ONE ARM TO HURL HIS JAVELIN...
HAH! THERE'S NOWHERE FOR YOU TO GO, IS THERE, GHOST-STAG?
I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE THE LOOK ON MY FATHER'S FACE WHEN I--
CROM AND MITRA!
EVEN THE LAD'S STRICT SIRE AND WATCHFUL MOTHER WOULD DOUBTLESS FORGIVE HIM FOR THE OATH THAT NOW ESCAPES HIS LIPS--
--AS, NOT THIRTY FEET DISTANT FROM HIM, THE STAG SUDDENLY DISSOLVES INTO MIST..
--A MIST THAT INSTANTLY REFORMS ITSELF--
--INTO A TALL, GAUNT HUMAN SHAPE--
--A WOMAN, CLOTHED IN ROBES AS THE STAG'S HIDE HAD BEEN--
--A WOMAN WITH A BILLOWING CLOUD OF IRON-GREY HAIR--

--HAIR THAT SWIRLS ABOUT A BONY, ALMOST EXPRESSIONLESS FACE, WITH ITS COLD, CAT-GREEN EYES!
YIELD, BOY!
IN THE STILLNESS, CONN IS AWARE OF HIS TREMBLING HANDS. IS THIS FEAR?
WHO IS THIS GHOST-WOMAN, TO TEACH FEAR TO THE SON OF CONAN THE CONQUEROR?
YIELD!? NEVER!
JUST THEN, AT A GESTURE FROM THE WOMAN-THING, LEAVES CRACKLE BEHIND HIM-- TWIGS SNAP LOUDLY IN THE NIGHT SILENCE--
AND JERKING HIS HEAD AROUND, THE BOY SEES THE TALL, LEAN MEN-- GAUNT AS MUMMIES AND AT LEAST SEVEN FEET TALL-- STEP INTO THE CLEARING FROM ALL SIDES
WHO--?
FROM HEAD TO HEEL THEY ARE CLAD IN BLACK GARMENTS THAT FIT TIGHTLY AS GLOVES--AND THEY HOLD STRANGE RODS OF DARK WOOD WITH SILVERY KNOBS.
BUT, IT IS THEIR FACES THAT STRIKE INTO CONN'S HEART THE THRILL OF SUPERSTITIOUS AWE...
FOR, THEY HAVE NO FACES!
BENEATH THE TIGHT-FITTING BLACK COWLS, THEIR VISAGES ARE SMOOTH, BLANK, WHITE OVALS!
AGAIN THE EERIE WOMAN SPEAKS:
YIELD!
NO! MY ANCESTORS FACED THE GIANT BEAR-- THE DREAD SNOW-DRAGON--EVEN THE SABRE-TOOTH!
SHALL I BOW THE KNEE TO AN OLD WOMAN AND MEN WITHOUT FACES?

THEN, YELLING THE CIMMERIAN WAR-CRY LEARNED FROM HIS MIGHTY SIRE, THE YOUTH CHARGES THE SINISTER, SURROUNDING FIGURES--
YEEEE-AHH!
--RAISING HIS JAVELIN, TO HURL IT AT THE NEAREST OF THE FACELESS ONES!
YET, BEFORE HIS PONY CAN MAKE MORE THAN ONE WEARY BOUND--
OWW
--AGONIZING PAIN SHOOTS UP HIS ARM, AND HIS WEAPON DROPS FROM NUMB FINGERS!
STILL, WITH AN INARTICULATE CRY, CONN CATCHES WITH HIS REMAINING HAND AT THE SWORD THAT CLINGS TO HIS HIP--
--EVEN AS, WITH MAGICAL SWIFTNESS, ONE OF THE BLACK-CLAD MEN GRASPS HIS MOUNT'S BRIDLE WITH A BONY HAND!
YOU THINK IT'S THAT EASY, DO YOU?
WELL, WE SHALL SEE!
WITH A GURGLING GROAN, THE TALL MAN FOLDS AT THE KNEES AND FALLS FACE-DOWN IN THE WET GRASS...
REAR, MARDUK! REAR!
BUT, LIKE PHANTOMS, HIS ATTACKERS EVADE THOSE IRON-SHOD HOOVES...


AND THEN-- THE SILVERY KNOB OF ONE OF THE HAND-HELD RODS STRIKES THE BOY'S WRIST--
UNNH--!
--AND HIS SWORD FLIES FROM FLACCID FINGERS.

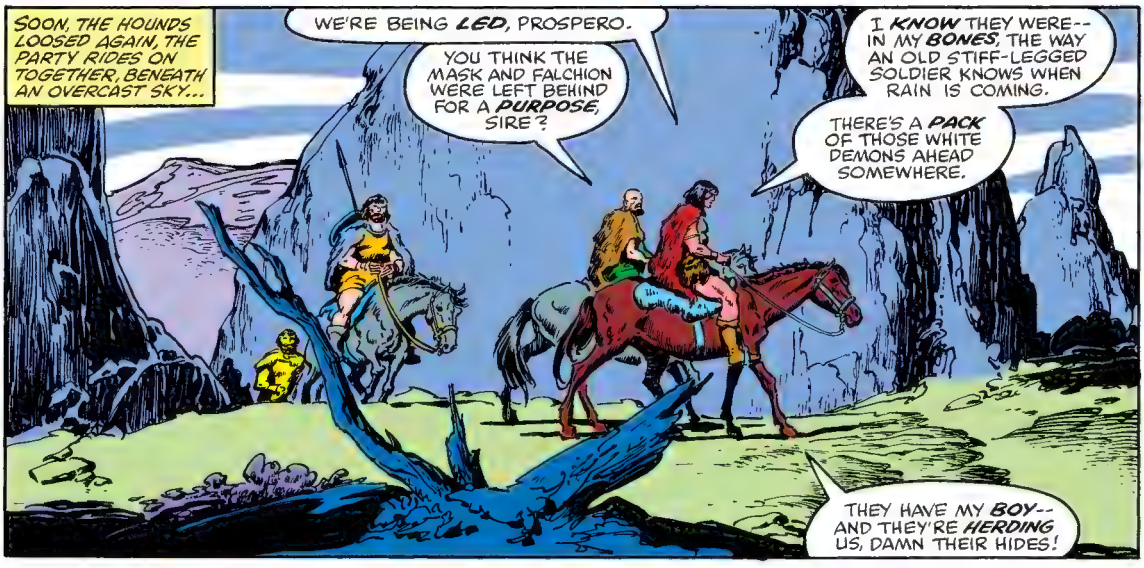
ANOTHER METAL BALL GENTLY STROKES THE BACK OF HIS HEAD--
OHHHH

--AND HE FALLS FROM THE SADDLE, A BUNDLE OF LOOSE LIMBS.
AH, SO WE HAVE HIM--!

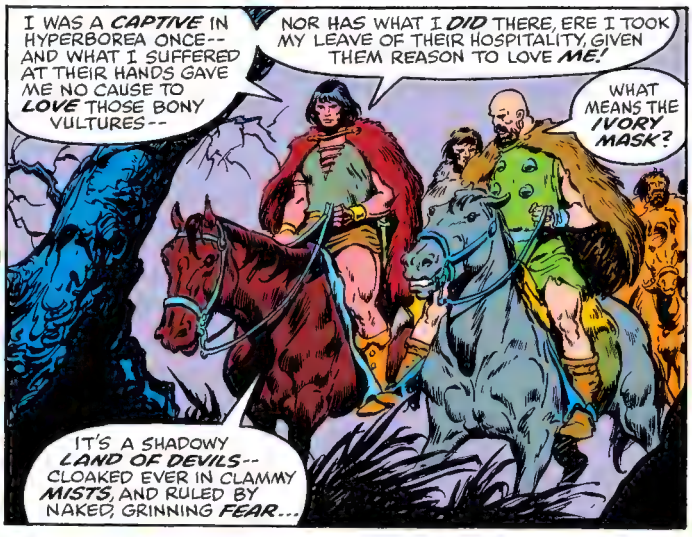
CONN-- CROWN PRINCE OF AQUILONIA-- HEIR APPARENT TO THE THRONE OF KING CONAN!
THOTH-AMON WILL BE PLEASED!

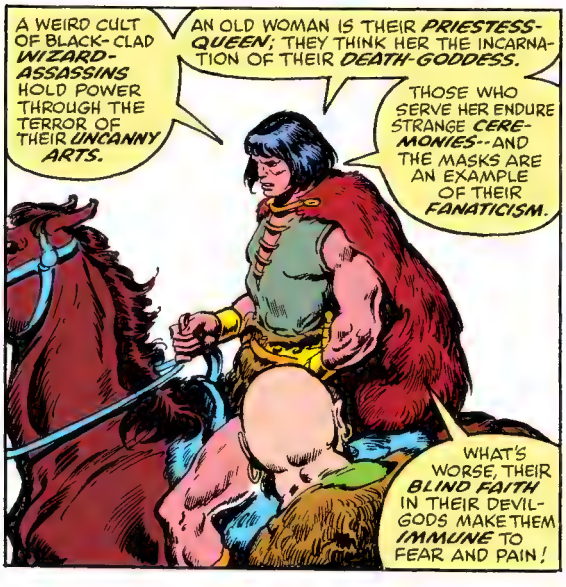
Come Morning:
HO, SIRE!
IT'S EURIC-- MY CHIEF HUNTSMAN!
AYE, MAJESTY-- WE SENT HIM ON AHEAD.

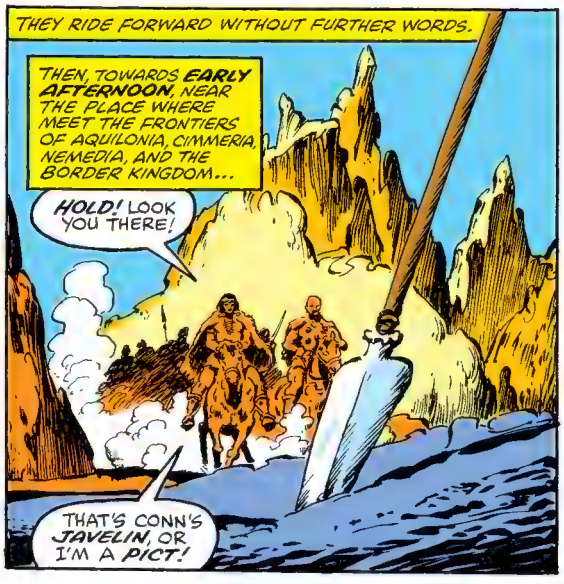
WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND, EURIC?
THIS, SIRE...!
AN IVORY MASK-- FEATURELESS, EXCEPT FOR THE EYE SLITS.
HYPERBOREAN WORK, CURSE THAT LAND OF DEVILS!
ANYTHING... ELSE?
BLOOD ON THE GRASS-- THE GRASS ITSELF TRAMPLED-- HOOFMARKS OF A YOUNG PONY--
--AND-- THIS, I FEAR--!
THE FALCHION I GAVE CONN-- ON HIS LAST BIRTHDAY!
WHEN THEY'VE FOUND THE TRACK, SOUND YOUR HORN AND GATHER THE MEN!
AND WAS THERE-- NOTHING MORE?
THE DOGS ARE SNIFFING ABOUT FOR A TRAIL NOW, SIRE.
ONCE AGAIN, THE KING OF AQUILONIA SHIVERS... AS IF AN UNSEEN DRAFT OF ICY AIR WERE BLOWING UPON HIS HEART.
THE SUN IS AN HOUR OLDER WHEN THEY FIND THE CORPSE, BURIED BENEATH A MOUND OF DEAD LEAVES...
SOMETIME LAST NIGHT, SIRE.
HE'S BEEN STRIPPED OF ANY CLOTHES HE MIGHT HAVE WORN-- BUT MITRA! HE WAS NIGH SEVEN FEET TALL!
HE WAS A HYPERBOREAN, ALL RIGHT...
NO OTHER MEN ON EARTH HAVE SUCH A BUILD ALONG WITH THAT PALE SKIN-- THE SILKY, COLORLESS HAIR--
--AND NOW, THOSE DEAD, CAT-GREEN EYES!


SOON, THE HOUNDS LOOSED AGAIN, THE PARTY RIDES ON TOGETHER, BENEATH AN OVERCAST SKY...
WE'RE BEING LED, PROSPERO.
YOU THINK THE MASK AND FALCHION WERE LEFT BEHIND FOR A PURPOSE, SIRE?
I KNOW THEY WERE-- IN MY BONES, THE WAY AN OLD STIFF-LEGGED SOLDIER KNOWS WHEN RAIN IS COMING.
THERE'S A PACK OF THOSE WHITE DEMONS AHEAD SOMEWHERE.
THEY HAVE MY BOY-- AND THEY'RE HERDING US, DAMN THEIR HIDES!

INTO AN AMBUSH, PERHAPS?
I DOUBT IT. WE'VE RIDDEN SAFELY THROUGH THREE PERFECT SITES FOR SUCH A TRAP IN THE LAST HOUR.
NO, THEY'VE SOME OTHER PURPOSE IN MIND.
MAYBE THEY'RE HOLDING THE YOUNG PRINCE FOR RANSOM!?
OR FOR BAIT!

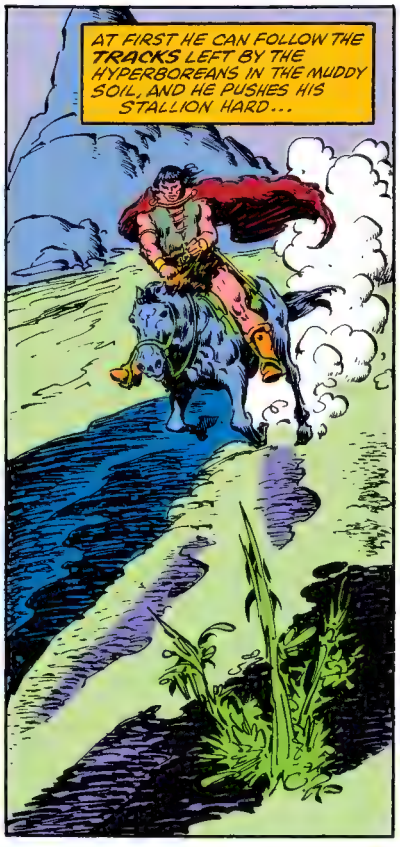

I WAS A CAPTIVE IN HYPERBOREA ONCE-- AND WHAT I SUFFERED AT THEIR HANDS GAVE ME NO CAUSE TO LOVE THOSE BONY VULTURES--
NOR HAS WHAT I DID THERE, ERE I TOOK MY LEAVE OF THEIR HOSPITALITY, GIVEN THEM REASON TO LOVE ME!
WHAT MEANS THE IVORY MASK?
IT'S A SHADOWY LAND OF DEVILS-- CLOAKED EVER IN CLAMMY MISTS, AND RULED BY NAKED, GRINNING FEAR...


A WEIRD CULT OF BLACK-CLAD WIZARD-ASSASSINS HOLD POWER THROUGH THE TERROR OF THEIR UNCANNY ARTS.
AN OLD WOMAN IS THEIR PRIESTESS-QUEEN; THEY THINK HER THE INCARNATION OF THEIR DEATH-GODDESS.
THOSE WHO SERVE HER ENDURE STRANGE CEREMONIES--AND THE MASKS ARE AN EXAMPLE OF THEIR FANATICISM.
WHAT'S WORSE, THEIR BLIND FAITH IN THEIR DEVIL-GODS MAKE THEM IMMUNE TO FEAR AND PAIN!


THEY RIDE FORWARD WITHOUT FURTHER WORDS.
THEN, TOWARDS EARLY AFTERNOON, NEAR THE PLACE WHERE MEET THE FRONTIERS OF AQUILONIA, CIMMERIA, NEMEDIA, AND THE BORDER KINGDOM...
HOLD! LOOK YOU THERE!
THAT'S CONN'S JAVELIN, OR I'M A PICT!

AYE, SIRE-- BUT THERE'S A ROLL OF WHITE PARCHMENT TIED TO IT--!
AS I'D EXPECTED! BRING IT HERE, EURIC!
THE MESSAGE IS CRUDELY SCRAWLED IN AQUILONIAN...
THE KING SHALL GO FORWARD ALONE TO POHIOLA. IF HE DOES THIS, THE SON OF HIS LOINS WILL NOT BE HARMED. IF HE DOES OTHER THAN THIS, THE CHILD WILL DIE IN WAYS IT IS NOT WHOLESOME TO DESCRIBE. THE KING SHALL FOLLOW THE PATH MARKED WITH THE WHITE HAND.
...AND IT IS WRITTEN... IN BLOOD.
CONAN SITS HIS HORSE, BROODING DARKLY BENEATH THE GLOOMY SKY, AS PROSPERO READS THE PARCHMENT TO THE MEN.
"...MARKED WITH THE WHITE HAND."
BUT SURELY, SIRE, YOU'LL NOT GO!
WITHOUT US WITH YOU, YOU'LL STAND NO CHANCE AGAINST--
I RIDE TO FIND MY SON, HUNTSMAN.
PROSPERO, HERE IS MY GOLDEN SEAL-RING; IT WILL MAKE YOU REGENT OF MY KINGDOM UNTIL I RETURN... OR UNTIL MY INFANT SECOND SON GROWS UP, IF I DON'T COME BACK.
I SUPPOSE THERE'S NO USE TRYING TO--
THERE ISN'T.
THEN GO WITH MITRA, CONAN OF AQUILONIA--
--BUT, BY THE GODS, I'LL GATHER AN ARMY AT TANASUL AND RIDE AFTER YOU, TO INVADE HYPERBOREA ON YOUR HEELS-- AND MAKE FOR THE CITADEL OF POHIOLA!
DO WHAT YOU WILL!
BY THEN, I'LL EITHER HAVE FREED CONN--OR ELSE JOINED HIM IN DEATH!

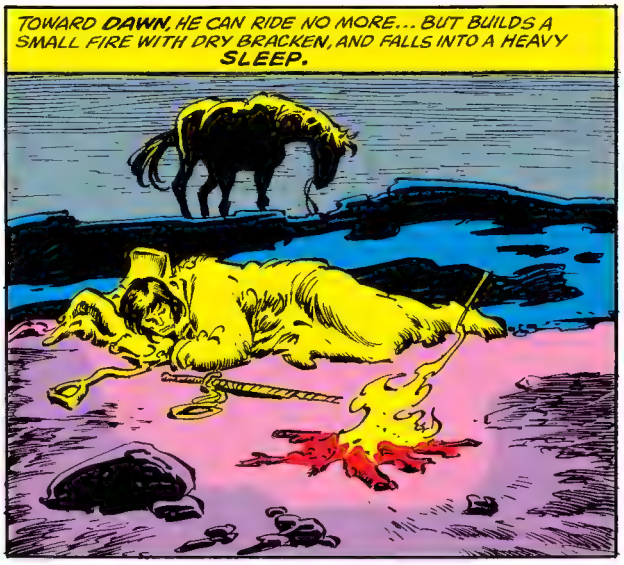
MOUNTED NOW ON BARON GUILAIME'S **BIG GRAY**, TO REPLACE HIS OWN WINDED ROAN, CONAN RIDES FORWARD THROUGH THE LAND CALLED THE **BORDER KINGDOM**...
...A DREARY **WASTE** OF DESOLATE, EMPTY MOORS AND COLD, UNEASY WINDS.

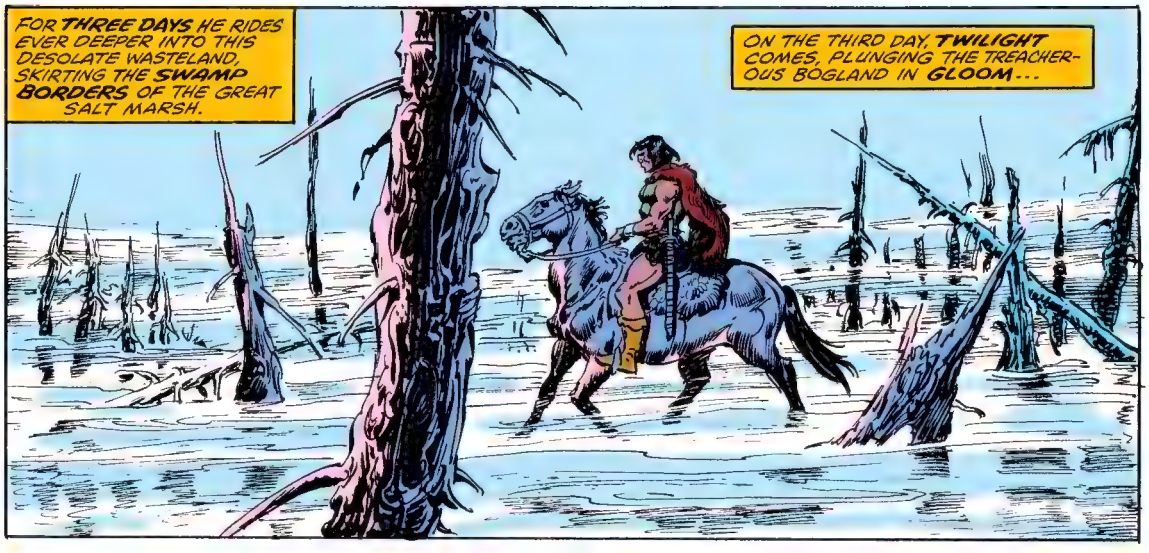

AT FIRST HE CAN FOLLOW THE **TRACKS** LEFT BY THE HYPERBOREANS IN THE MUDDY SOIL, AND HE PUSHES HIS STALLION HARD...

FOR, THERE IS THE SLIMMEST OF CHANCES THAT HE MIGHT **CATCH UP** WITH THE PALE-SKINNED DEVILS BEFORE THEY REACH THEIR FORTRESS.
SOON, THE TRAIL **FADES OUT** ON THE STONY SOIL... BUT THERE STILL IS LITTLE CHANCE TO **LOSE** THE TRAIL...

FOR, NOW AND AGAIN, HE PASSES A **SIGN** THAT HIS SON'S ABDUCTORS HAVE LEFT BOTH TO TAUNT AND TO GUIDE HIM:
THE IMPRINT OF A **HAND**, WHITE AGAINST SOIL OR EVEN SOLID ROCK!
WITCHCRAFT!

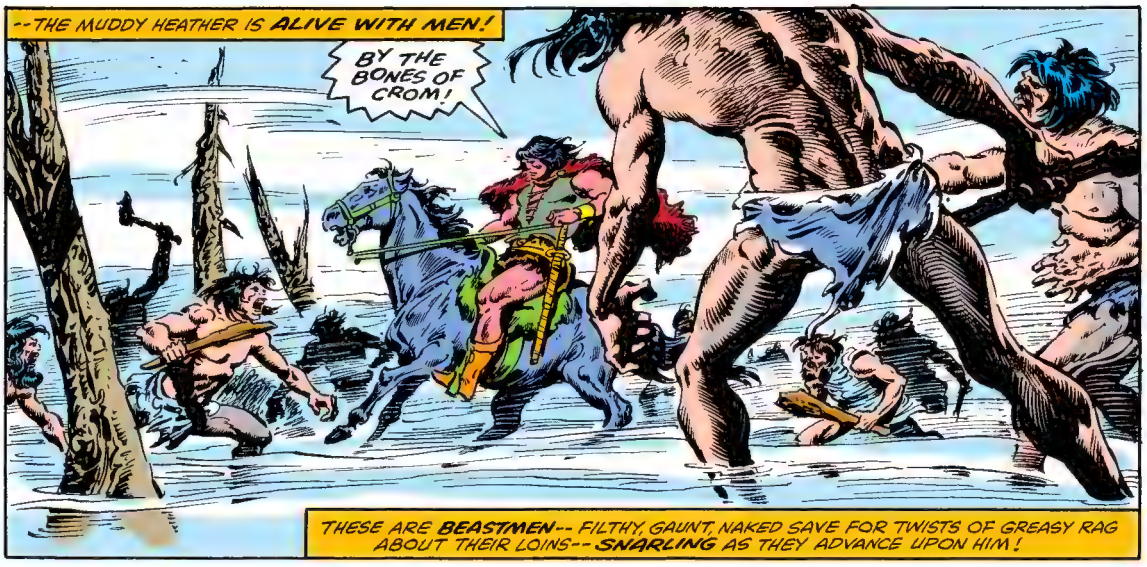
HOUR AFTER HOUR HE RIDES STEADILY ON, STRIVING NOT TO REMEMBER THAT HIS OFFSPRING IS CAPTIVE OF THE WITCHMEN... AS THE WORLD DARKENS TOWARD NIGHT.
ONE BY ONE THE FEW STARS COME OUT, THOUGH A HAZE OVERHANGS MOST OF THE SKY.

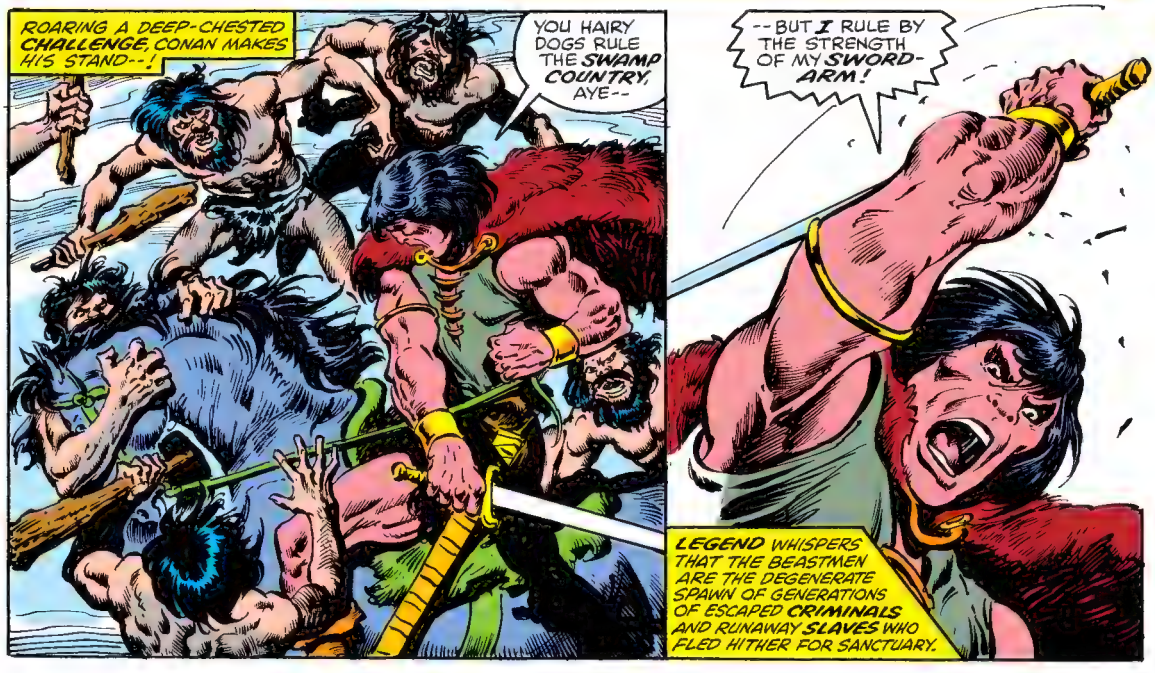

TOWARD DAWN, HE CAN RIDE NO MORE... BUT BUILDS A SMALL FIRE WITH DRY BRACKEN, AND FALLS INTO A HEAVY SLEEP.

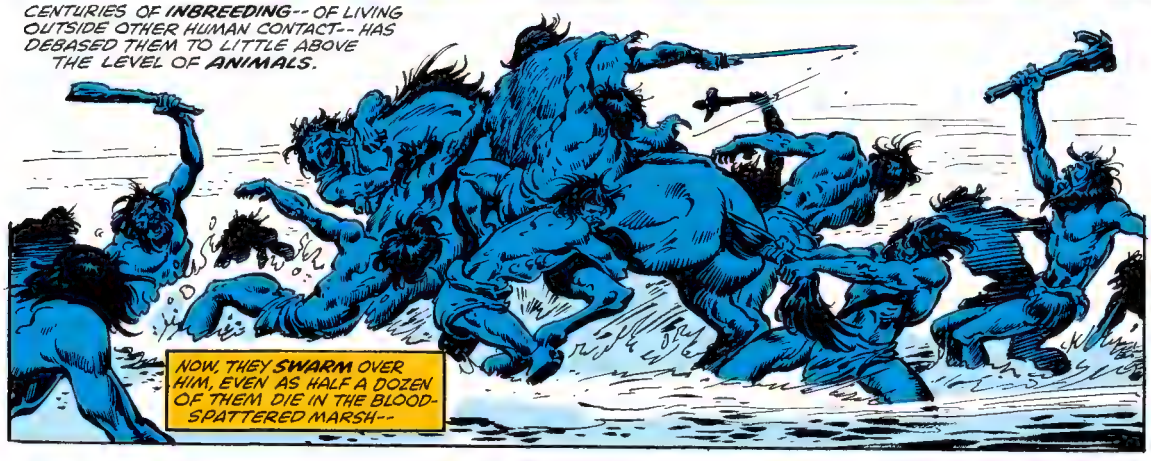

FOR THREE DAYS HE RIDES EVER DEEPER INTO THIS DESOLATE WASTELAND, SKIRTING THE SWAMP BORDERS OF THE GREAT SALT MARSH.
ON THE THIRD DAY, TWILIGHT COMES, PLUNGING THE TREACHEROUS BOGLAND IN GLOOM...

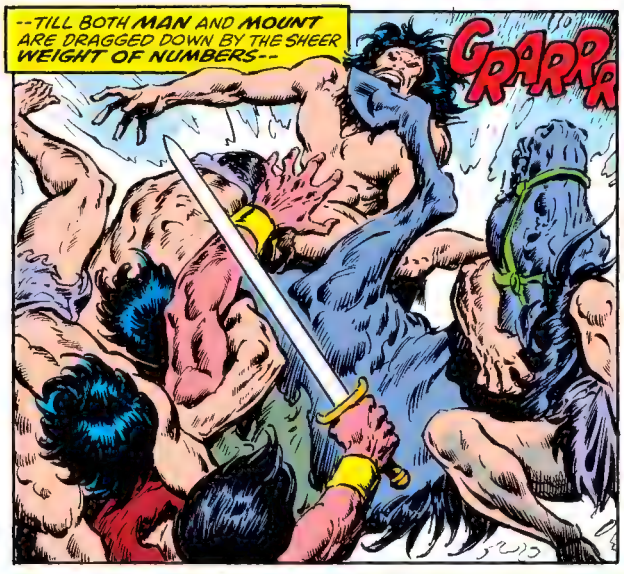
...WHEN, AT A FORKING OF THE PATH:
SO! THEY DON'T WANT TO TAKE A CHANCE I'D LOSE MY WAY, EH?
THEY DON'T EVEN MIND THAT I KNOW I'M GALLOPING STRAIGHT INTO A TRAP.

THE MOON'S COLD FACE IS MASKED BEHIND A LACY VEIL OF VAPOR, AS HE DRIVES HIS STALLION ALONG THE PATHWAY MARKED BY THE WHITE HAND.
THEN, SUDDENLY, AMID THE THICKENING DARKNESS--

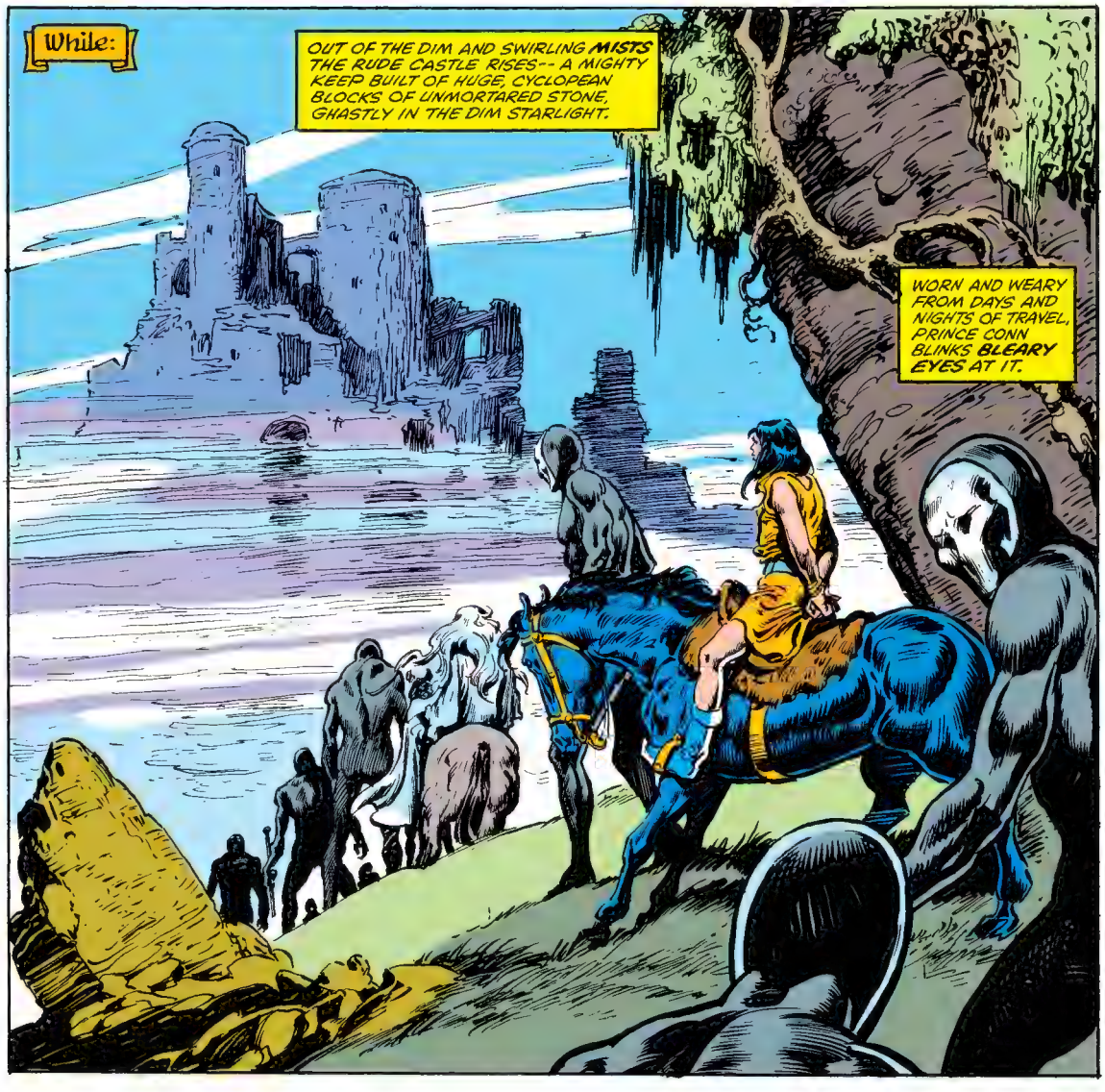

--THE MUDDY HEATHER IS ALIVE WITH MEN!
BY THE BONES OF CROM!
THESE ARE BEASTMEN-- FILTHY, GAUNT, NAKED SAVE FOR TWISTS OF GREASY RAG ABOUT THEIR LOINS--SNARLING AS THEY ADVANCE UPON HIM!

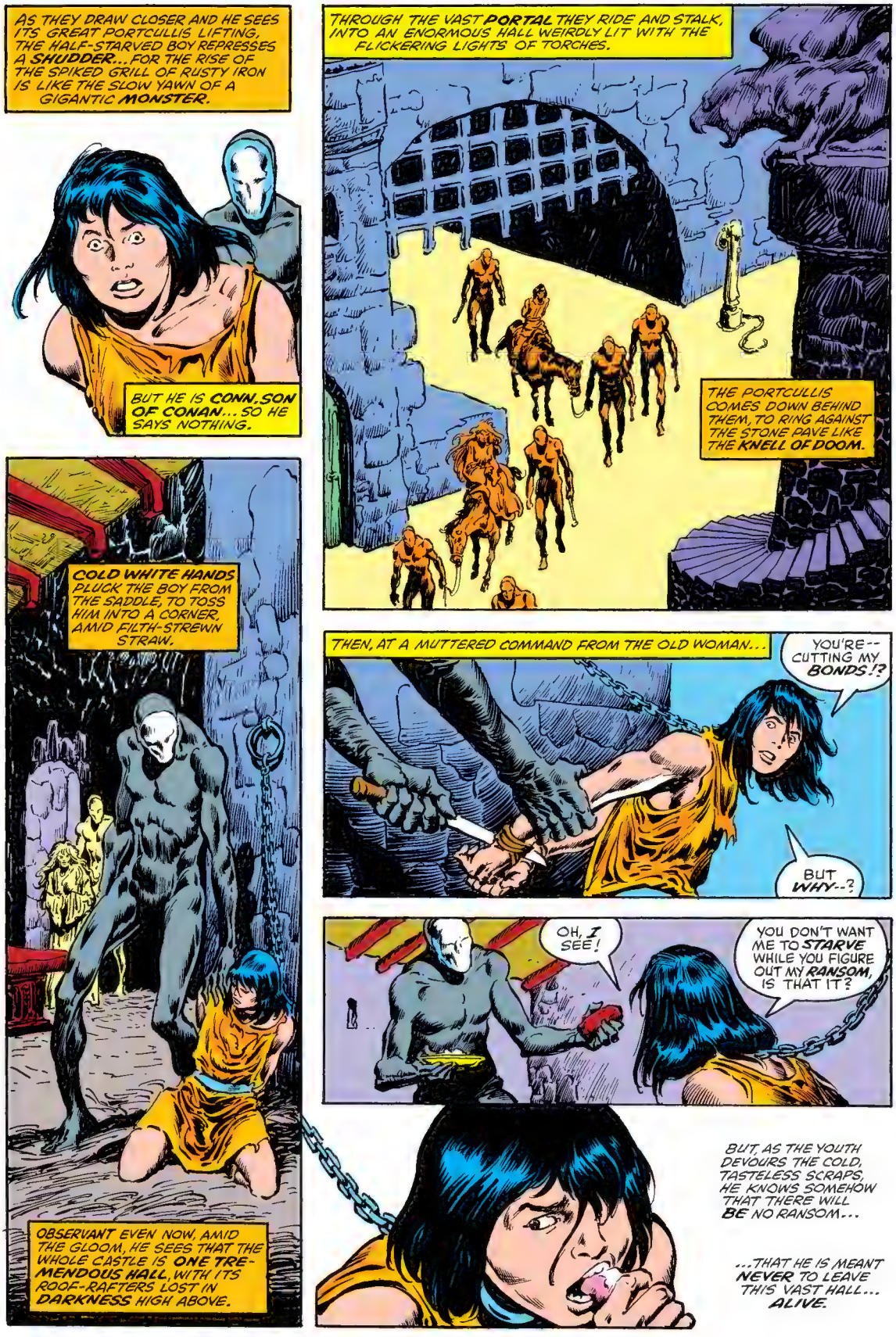

ROARING A DEEP-CHESTED CHALLENGE, CONAN MAKES HIS STAND--!
YOU HAIRY DOGS RULE THE SWAMP COUNTRY, AYE--
--BUT I RULE BY THE STRENGTH OF MY SWORD-ARM!
LEGEND WHISPERS THAT THE BEASTMEN ARE THE DEGENERATE SPAWN OF GENERATIONS OF ESCAPED CRIMINALS AND RUNAWAY SLAVES WHO FLED HITHER FOR SANCTUARY.


CENTURIES OF INBREEDING-- OF LIVING OUTSIDE OTHER HUMAN CONTACT-- HAS DEBASED THEM TO LITTLE ABOVE THE LEVEL OF ANIMALS.
NOW, THEY SWARM OVER HIM, EVEN AS HALF A DOZEN OF THEM DIE IN THE BLOOD-SPATTERED MARSH--


--TILL BOTH MAN AND MOUNT ARE DRAGGED DOWN BY THE SHEER WEIGHT OF NUMBERS--
GRARRR

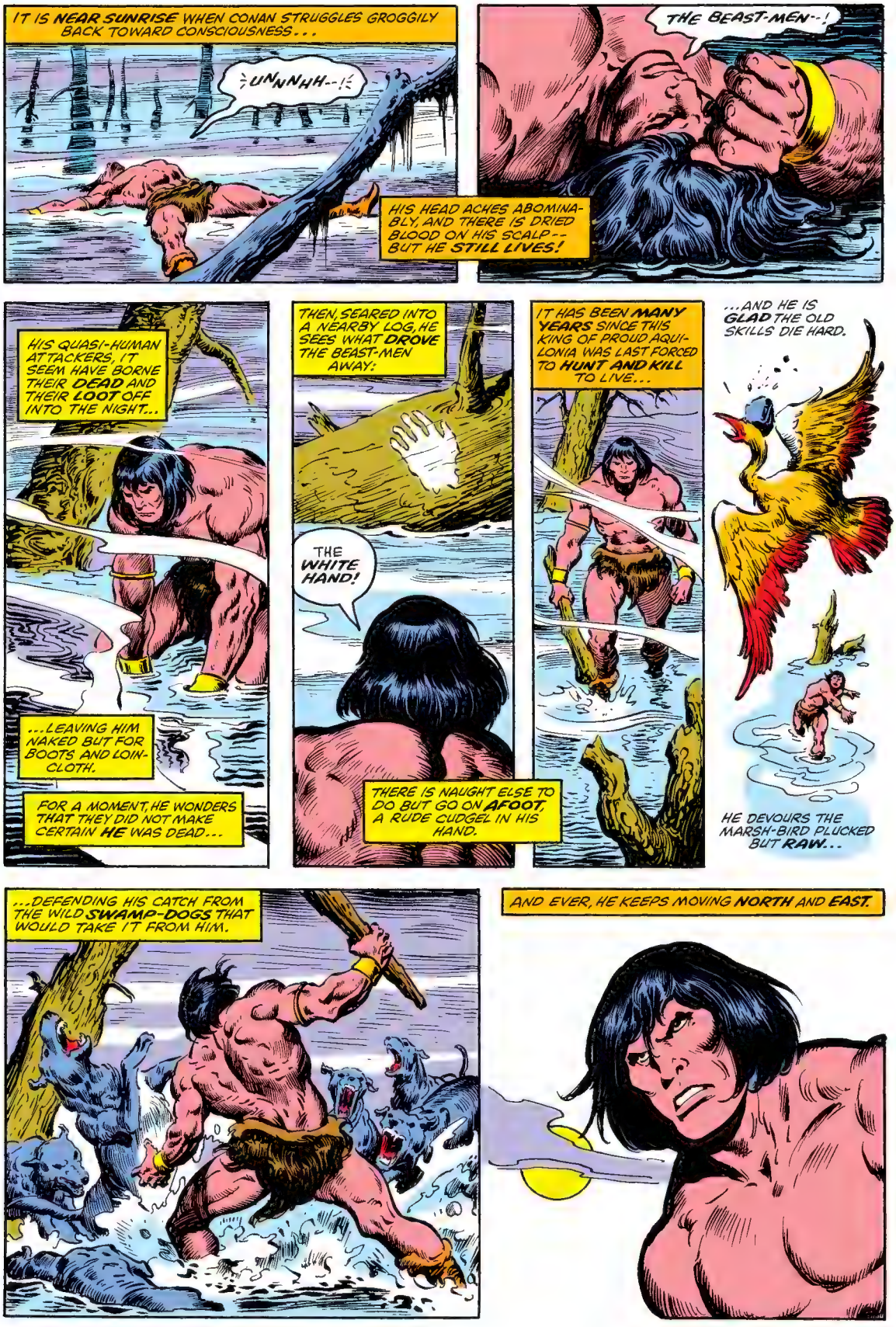
--AND CONAN'S WORLD EXPLODES!
UNNNH!!

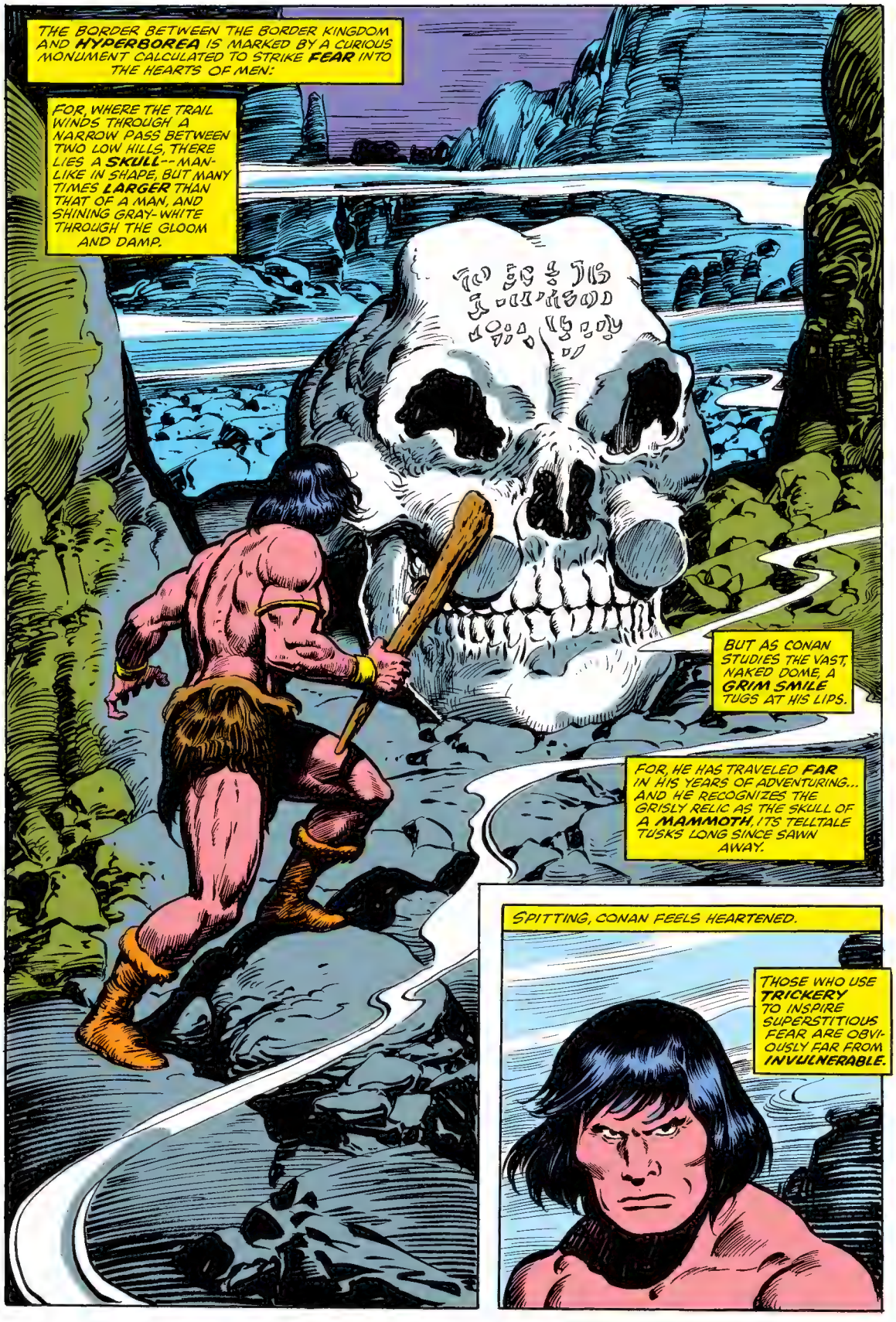

While:
OUT OF THE DIM AND SWIRLING MISTS THE RUDE CASTLE RISES-- A MIGHTY KEEP BUILT OF HUGE, CYCLOPEAN BLOCKS OF UNMORTARED STONE, GHASTLY IN THE DIM STARLIGHT.
WORN AND WEARY FROM DAYS AND NIGHTS OF TRAVEL, PRINCE CONN BLINKS BLEARY EYES AT IT.

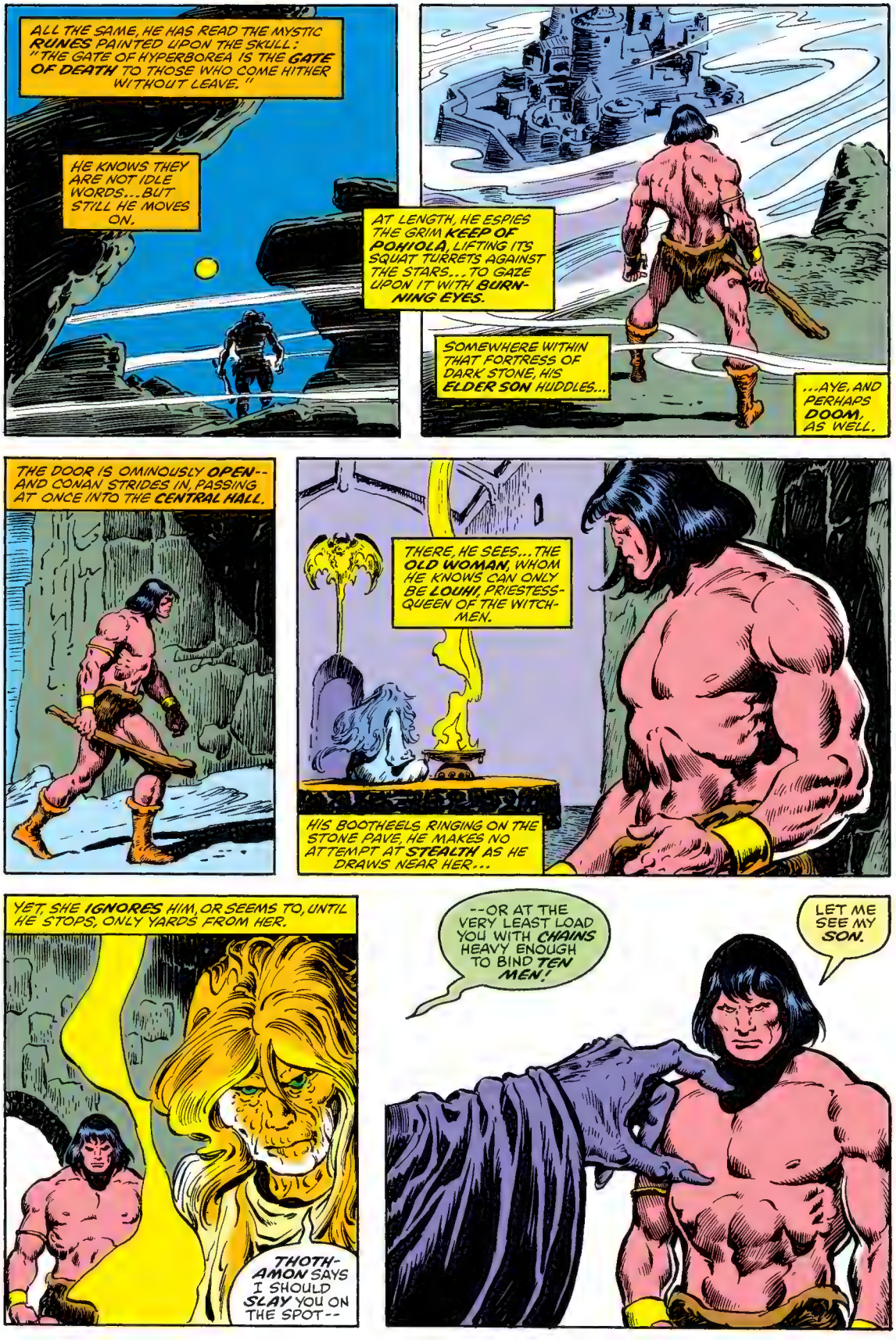

AS THEY DRAW CLOSER AND HE SEES ITS GREAT PORTCULLIS LIFTING, THE HALF-STARVED BOY REPRESSES A SHUDDER... FOR THE RISE OF THE SPIKED GRILL OF RUSTY IRON IS LIKE THE SLOW YAWN OF A GIGANTIC MONSTER.
BUT HE IS CONN, SON OF CONAN... SO HE SAYS NOTHING.
THROUGH THE VAST PORTAL THEY RIDE AND STALK, INTO AN ENORMOUS HALL WEIRDLY LIT WITH THE FLICKERING LIGHTS OF TORCHES.
THE PORTCULLIS COMES DOWN BEHIND THEM, TO RING AGAINST THE STONE PAVE LIKE THE KNELL OF DOOM.
COLD WHITE HANDS PLUCK THE BOY FROM THE SADDLE, TO TOSS HIM INTO A CORNER, AMID FILTH-STREWN STRAW.
OBSERVANT EVEN NOW, AMID THE GLOOM, HE SEES THAT THE WHOLE CASTLE IS ONE TREMENDOUS HALL, WITH ITS ROOF-RAFTERS LOST IN DARKNESS HIGH ABOVE.
THEN, AT A MUTTERED COMMAND FROM THE OLD WOMAN...
YOU'RE-- CUTTING MY BONDS!?
BUT WHY--?
OH, I SEE!
YOU DON'T WANT ME TO STARVE WHILE YOU FIGURE OUT MY RANSOM, IS THAT IT?
BUT, AS THE YOUTH DEVOURS THE COLD, TASTELESS SCRAPS, HE KNOWS SOMEHOW THAT THERE WILL BE NO RANSOM...
...THAT HE IS MEANT NEVER TO LEAVE THIS VAST HALL... ALIVE.

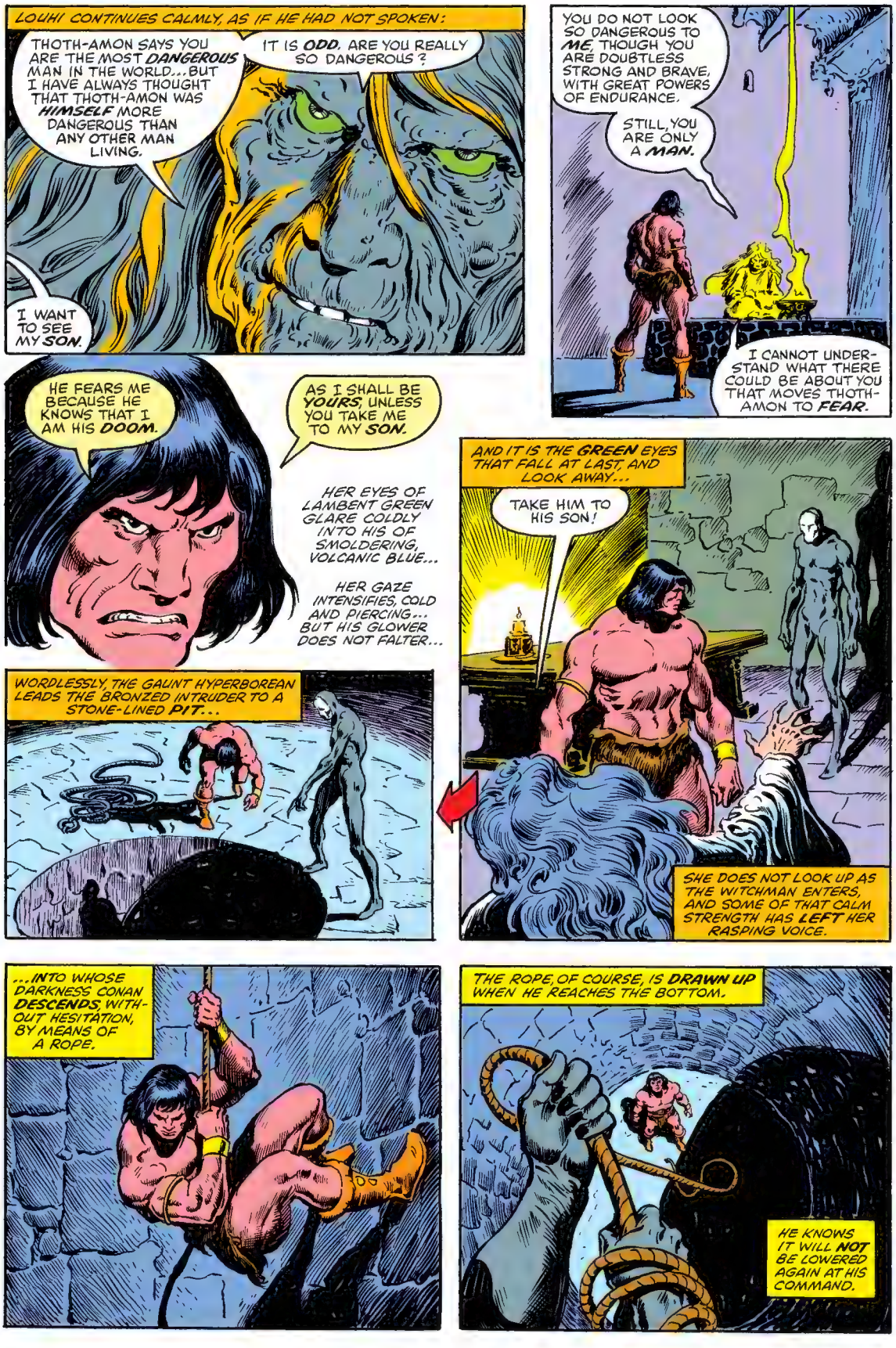
HIS FATHER HAS TAUGHT HIM, HOWEVER, TO ACCEPT WHAT YOU CANNOT CHANGE...
...AND CATCH SUCH SLEEP AS WILL REFRESH YOU, IN CASE YOU CAN CHANGE IT, AFTER ALL!
THE DULL SOUND OF A GONG AWAKENS HIM... AND CONN FINDS THAT, IN THIS GLOOMY PILE OF STONE WHERE THE LIGHT OF DAY NEVER PIERCES, HE HAS LOST ALL SENSE OF TIME.
THE SMALL GONG, HE SEES, IS CARVED IN THE SHAPE OF A HUMAN SKULL.
AND, ON A CIRCULAR STONE DAIS IN THE HALL'S CENTER, THE WITCHWOMAN IS SEATED, AS A GREAT COPPER BOWL OF GLOWING COALS SHEDS A WAVERING LIGHT THE COLOR OF BLOOD ON HER FACE.
THEN, THE WITCHMEN ENTER, STILL CLAD IN THEIR COWLS AND MASKS... BUT NOT ALONE.
CONN RECALLS THAT IN THE SWAMP DAYS BEFORE, THEY HAD TAKEN THIS MAN CAPTIVE.
--AS HE PLAYS UNWILLING WITNESS TO A TERRIBLE CEREMONY--
NNNGAA! NNGGAAA!!
DESPITE THE POOR DEVIL'S NIGH-BESTIAL STATE, CONN FEELS A SUDDEN PITY FOR THIS WRITHING, HELPLESS, PLEADING SPECIMEN--
NNGGHH--!?

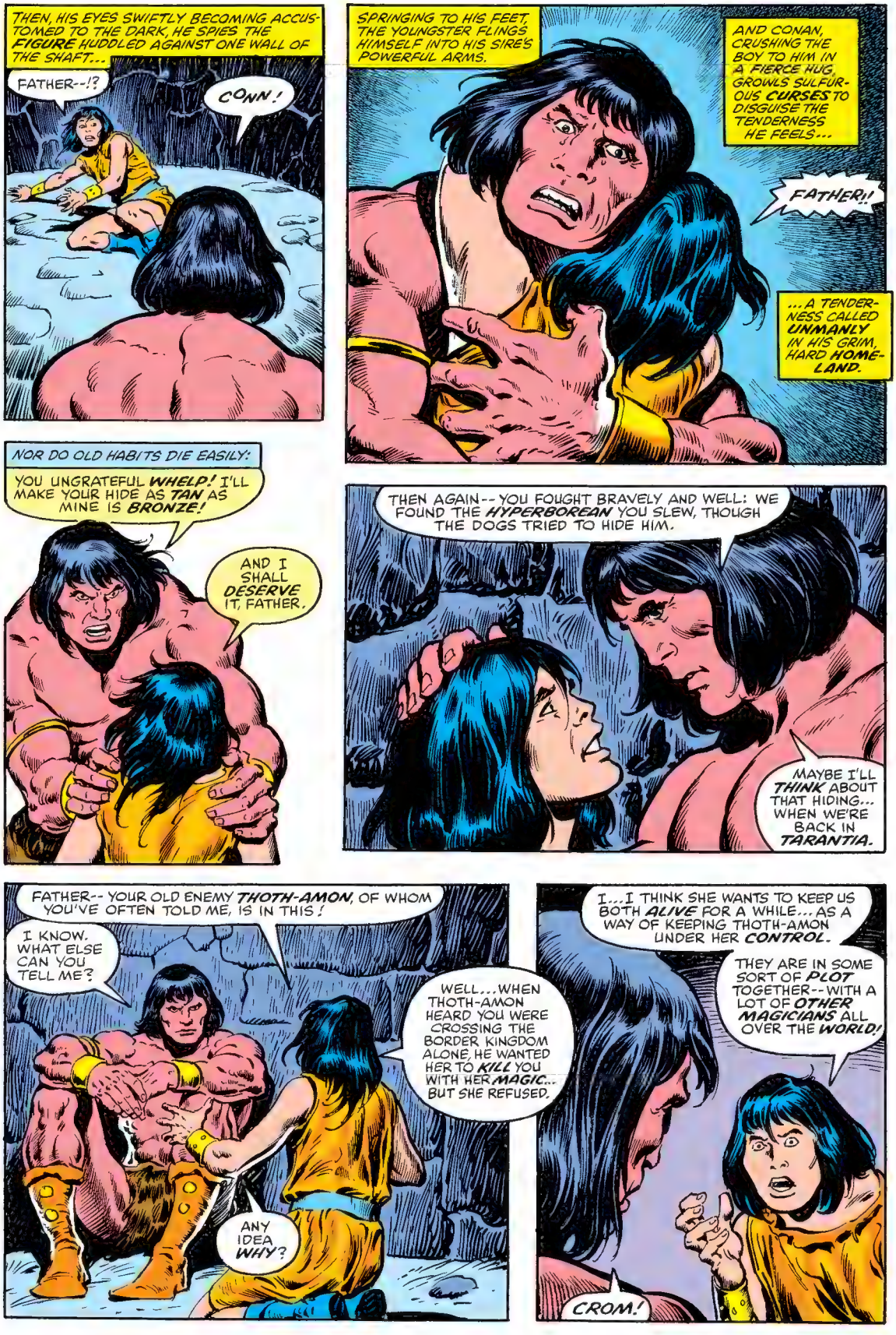
--AND THE VICTIM SLOWLY GOES LIMP.
ALL THIS TIME, THE AGED PRIESTESS HAS STARED SIGHTLESSLY AHEAD... SWAYING FROM SIDE TO SIDE, HUMMING A TUNELESS AIR...
...AS, AMID THE THIN, EERIE MOAN OF HER SONG, PUNCTUATED BY THE MONOTONOUS RHYTHM OF THE GONG, THE SMOKE GROWS, FED BY CRIMSON WINE.
AS FOR CONN: HE STARES WITH HELPLESS FASCINATION... AS THE SMOKE BEGINS TO EDDY TO AND FRO, AS IF TO THE TOUCH OF INVISIBLE HANDS, MOLDING IT... SHAPING IT.
FOR, THE ROILING CLOUD OF SMOKE IS TAKING THE SHAPE OF A MAN... TALL, GAUNT... DRAPED IN EASTERN ROBES.
AND SUDDENLY, CONN KNOWS HE HAS HEARD THOSE ALOOF, AQUILINE FEATURES DESCRIBED IN GRIM DETAIL... BY HIS FATHER!
HAIL, O LOUHI...!
GREETINGS... THOTH-AMON!
NOW, IN TRUTH, DO THE CHILLY CLAWS OF FEAR CLOSE AROUND CONN'S HEART... FOR HE KNOWS HE IS IN THE CLUTCHES OF EARTH'S MIGHTIEST EVIL MAGICIAN...
CROM.
...THE STYGIAN SORCERER WHO HAS SWORN, LONG SINCE, TO BRING CONAN THE CIMMERIAN DOWN TO A TERRIBLE DEATH--AND TO CRUSH AQUILONIA ITSELF INTO THE MIRE!

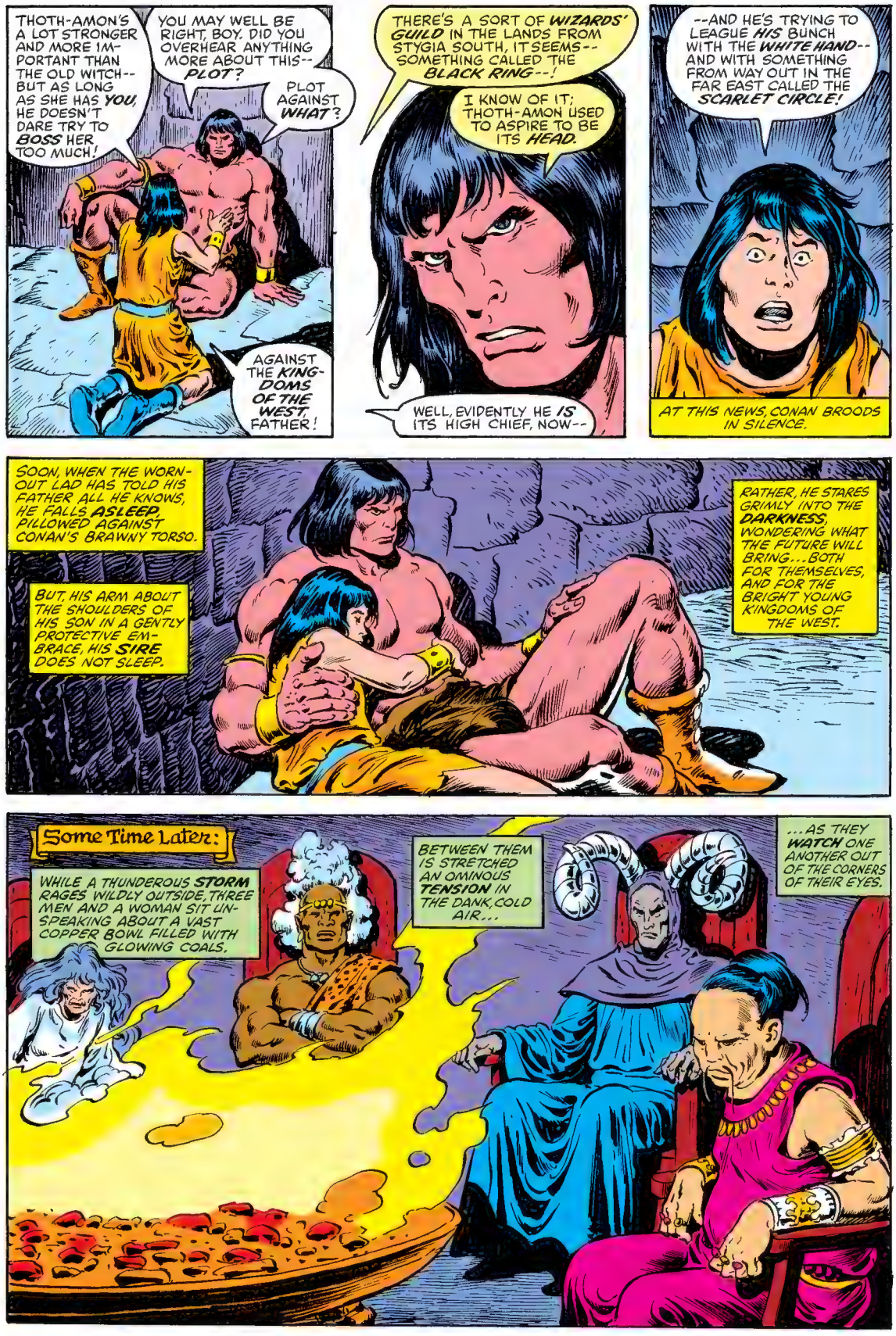

IT IS NEAR SUNRISE WHEN CONAN STRUGGLES GROGGILY BACK TOWARD CONSCIOUSNESS...
UNNNHH--!
HIS HEAD ACHES ABOMINABLY, AND THERE IS DRIED BLOOD ON HIS SCALP--- BUT HE STILL LIVES!
THE BEAST-MEN--!
HIS QUASI-HUMAN ATTACKERS, IT SEEM HAVE BORNE THEIR DEAD AND THEIR LOOT OFF INTO THE NIGHT...
...LEAVING HIM NAKED BUT FOR BOOTS AND LOINCLOTH.
FOR A MOMENT, HE WONDERS THAT THEY DID NOT MAKE CERTAIN HE WAS DEAD...
THEN, SEARED INTO A NEARBY LOG, HE SEES WHAT DROVE THE BEAST-MEN AWAY:
THE WHITE HAND!
THERE IS NAUGHT ELSE TO DO BUT GO ON AFOOT, A RUDE CUDGEL IN HIS HAND.
IT HAS BEEN MANY YEARS SINCE THIS KING OF PROUD AQUILONIA WAS LAST FORCED TO HUNT AND KILL TO LIVE...
...AND HE IS GLAD THE OLD SKILLS DIE HARD.
HE DEVOURS THE MARSH-BIRD PLUCKED BUT RAW...
...DEFENDING HIS CATCH FROM THE WILD SWAMP-DOGS THAT WOULD TAKE IT FROM HIM.
AND EVER, HE KEEPS MOVING NORTH AND EAST.


THE BORDER BETWEEN THE BORDER KINGDOM AND HYPERBOREA IS MARKED BY A CURIOUS MONUMENT CALCULATED TO STRIKE FEAR INTO THE HEARTS OF MEN:
FOR, WHERE THE TRAIL WINDS THROUGH A NARROW PASS BETWEEN TWO LOW HILLS, THERE LIES A SKULL--MAN-LIKE IN SHAPE, BUT MANY TIMES LARGER THAN THAT OF A MAN, AND SHINING GRAY-WHITE THROUGH THE GLOOM AND DAMP.
BUT AS CONAN STUDIES THE VAST, NAKED DOME, A GRIM SMILE TUGS AT HIS LIPS.
FOR, HE HAS TRAVELED FAR IN HIS YEARS OF ADVENTURING... AND HE RECOGNIZES THE GRISLY RELIC AS THE SKULL OF A MAMMOTH, ITS TELLTALE TUSKS LONG SINCE SAWN AWAY.
SPITTING, CONAN FEELS HEARTENED.
THOSE WHO USE TRICKERY TO INSPIRE SUPERSTITIOUS FEAR ARE OBVIOUSLY FAR FROM INVULNERABLE.

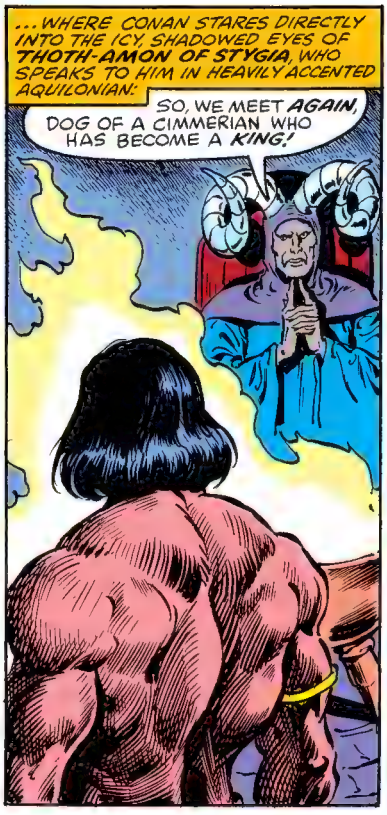

ALL THE SAME, HE HAS READ THE MYSTIC RUNES PAINTED UPON THE SKULL: "THE GATE OF HYPERBOREA IS THE GATE OF DEATH TO THOSE WHO COME HITHER WITHOUT LEAVE."
HE KNOWS THEY ARE NOT IDLE WORDS...BUT STILL HE MOVES ON.
AT LENGTH, HE ESPIES THE GRIM KEEP OF POHIOLA, LIFTING ITS SQUAT TURRETS AGAINST THE STARS...TO GAZE UPON IT WITH BURNING EYES.
SOMEWHERE WITHIN THAT FORTRESS OF DARK STONE, HIS ELDER SON HUDDLES...
...AYE, AND PERHAPS DOOM, AS WELL.
THE DOOR IS OMINOUSLY OPEN--AND CONAN STRIDES IN, PASSING AT ONCE INTO THE CENTRAL HALL.
THERE, HE SEES...THE OLD WOMAN, WHOM HE KNOWS CAN ONLY BE LOUHI, PRIESTESS-QUEEN OF THE WITCH-MEN.
HIS BOOTHEELS RINGING ON THE STONE PAVE, HE MAKES NO ATTEMPT AT STEALTH AS HE DRAWS NEAR HER...
YET, SHE IGNORES HIM, OR SEEMS TO, UNTIL HE STOPS, ONLY YARDS FROM HER.
THOTH-AMON SAYS I SHOULD SLAY YOU ON THE SPOT--
--OR AT THE VERY LEAST LOAD YOU WITH CHAINS HEAVY ENOUGH TO BIND TEN MEN!
LET ME SEE MY SON.


LOUHI CONTINUES CALMLY, AS IF HE HAD NOT SPOKEN:
THOTH-AMON SAYS YOU ARE THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD... BUT I HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THOTH-AMON WAS HIMSELF MORE DANGEROUS THAN ANY OTHER MAN LIVING.
IT IS ODD. ARE YOU REALLY SO DANGEROUS?
I WANT TO SEE MY SON.
YOU DO NOT LOOK SO DANGEROUS TO ME, THOUGH YOU ARE DOUBTLESS STRONG AND BRAVE, WITH GREAT POWERS OF ENDURANCE.
STILL, YOU ARE ONLY A MAN.
I CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHAT THERE COULD BE ABOUT YOU THAT MOVES THOTH-AMON TO FEAR.
HE FEARS ME BECAUSE HE KNOWS THAT I AM HIS DOOM.
AS I SHALL BE YOURS, UNLESS YOU TAKE ME TO MY SON.
HER EYES OF LAMBENT GREEN GLARE COLDLY INTO HIS OF SMOLDERING, VOLCANIC BLUE...
HER GAZE INTENSIFIES, COLD AND PIERCING... BUT HIS GLOWER DOES NOT FALTER...
AND IT IS THE GREEN EYES THAT FALL AT LAST, AND LOOK AWAY...
TAKE HIM TO HIS SON!
SHE DOES NOT LOOK UP AS THE WITCHMAN ENTERS, AND SOME OF THAT CALM STRENGTH HAS LEFT HER RASPING VOICE.
WORDLESSLY, THE GAUNT HYPERBOREAN LEADS THE BRONZED INTRUDER TO A STONE-LINED PIT...
...INTO WHOSE DARKNESS CONAN DESCENDS, WITHOUT HESITATION, BY MEANS OF A ROPE.
THE ROPE, OF COURSE, IS DRAWN UP WHEN HE REACHES THE BOTTOM.
HE KNOWS IT WILL NOT BE LOWERED AGAIN AT HIS COMMAND.

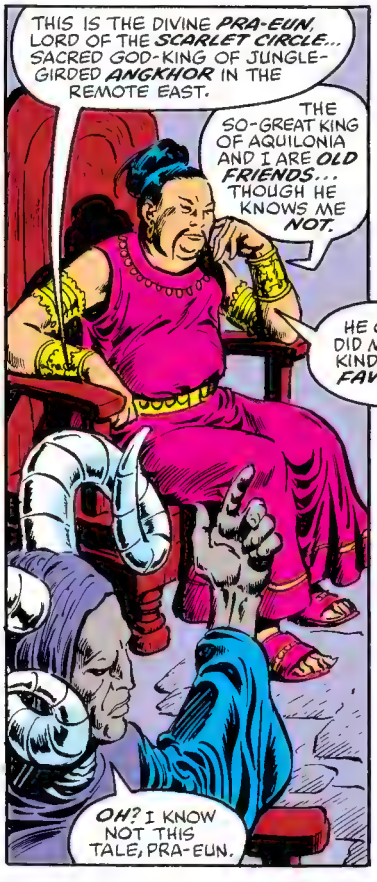

THEN, HIS EYES SWIFTLY BECOMING ACCUSTOMED TO THE DARK, HE SPIES THE FIGURE HUDDLED AGAINST ONE WALL OF THE SHAFT...
FATHER--!?
CONN!
SPRINGING TO HIS FEET, THE YOUNGSTER FLINGS HIMSELF INTO HIS SIRE'S POWERFUL ARMS.
AND CONAN, CRUSHING THE BOY TO HIM IN A FIERCE HUG, GROWLS SULFUROUS CURSES TO DISGUISE THE TENDERNESS HE FEELS...
FATHER!!
...A TENDERNESS CALLED UNMANLY IN HIS GRIM, HARD HOMELAND.
NOR DO OLD HABITS DIE EASILY:
YOU UNGRATEFUL WHELP! I'LL MAKE YOUR HIDE AS TAN AS MINE IS BRONZE!
AND I SHALL DESERVE IT, FATHER.
THEN AGAIN--YOU FOUGHT BRAVELY AND WELL: WE FOUND THE HYPERBOREAN YOU SLEW, THOUGH THE DOGS TRIED TO HIDE HIM.
MAYBE I'LL THINK ABOUT THAT HIDING... WHEN WE'RE BACK IN TARANTIA.
FATHER--YOUR OLD ENEMY THOTH-AMON, OF WHOM YOU'VE OFTEN TOLD ME, IS IN THIS!
I KNOW. WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TELL ME?
WELL...WHEN THOTH-AMON HEARD YOU WERE CROSSING THE BORDER KINGDOM ALONE, HE WANTED HER TO KILL YOU WITH HER MAGIC... BUT SHE REFUSED.
ANY IDEA WHY?
I...I THINK SHE WANTS TO KEEP US BOTH ALIVE FOR A WHILE... AS A WAY OF KEEPING THOTH-AMON UNDER HER CONTROL.
THEY ARE IN SOME SORT OF PLOT TOGETHER--WITH A LOT OF OTHER MAGICIANS ALL OVER THE WORLD!
CROM!


THOTH-AMON'S A LOT STRONGER AND MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE OLD WITCH--BUT AS LONG AS SHE HAS YOU, HE DOESN'T DARE TRY TO BOSS HER TOO MUCH!
YOU MAY WELL BE RIGHT, BOY. DID YOU OVERHEAR ANYTHING MORE ABOUT THIS--PLOT?
PLOT AGAINST WHAT?
AGAINST THE KINGDOMS OF THE WEST, FATHER!
THERE'S A SORT OF WIZARDS' GUILD IN THE LANDS FROM STYGIA SOUTH, IT SEEMS--SOMETHING CALLED THE BLACK RING--!
I KNOW OF IT; THOTH-AMON USED TO ASPIRE TO BE ITS HEAD.
WELL, EVIDENTLY HE IS ITS HIGH CHIEF, NOW--
--AND HE'S TRYING TO LEAGUE HIS BUNCH WITH THE WHITE HAND--AND WITH SOMETHING FROM WAY OUT IN THE FAR EAST CALLED THE SCARLET CIRCLE!
AT THIS NEWS, CONAN BROODS IN SILENCE.
SOON, WHEN THE WORN-OUT LAD HAS TOLD HIS FATHER ALL HE KNOWS, HE FALLS ASLEEP, PILLOWED AGAINST CONAN'S BRAWNY TORSO.
BUT, HIS ARM ABOUT THE SHOULDERS OF HIS SON IN A GENTLY PROTECTIVE EMBRACE, HIS SIRE DOES NOT SLEEP.
RATHER, HE STARES GRIMLY INTO THE DARKNESS, WONDERING WHAT THE FUTURE WILL BRING...BOTH FOR THEMSELVES, AND FOR THE BRIGHT YOUNG KINGDOMS OF THE WEST.
Some Time Later:
WHILE A THUNDEROUS STORM RAGES WILDLY OUTSIDE, THREE MEN AND A WOMAN SIT UNSPEAKING ABOUT A VAST COPPER BOWL FILLED WITH GLOWING COALS.
BETWEEN THEM IS STRETCHED AN OMINOUS TENSION IN THE DANK, COLD AIR...
...AS THEY WATCH ONE ANOTHER OUT OF THE CORNERS OF THEIR EYES.

THEN, ESCORTED BY A DOUBLE FILE OF THE BLACK-CLAD ONES, CONAN AND HIS SON ARE BROUGHT TO THE FOOT OF THE DAIS...

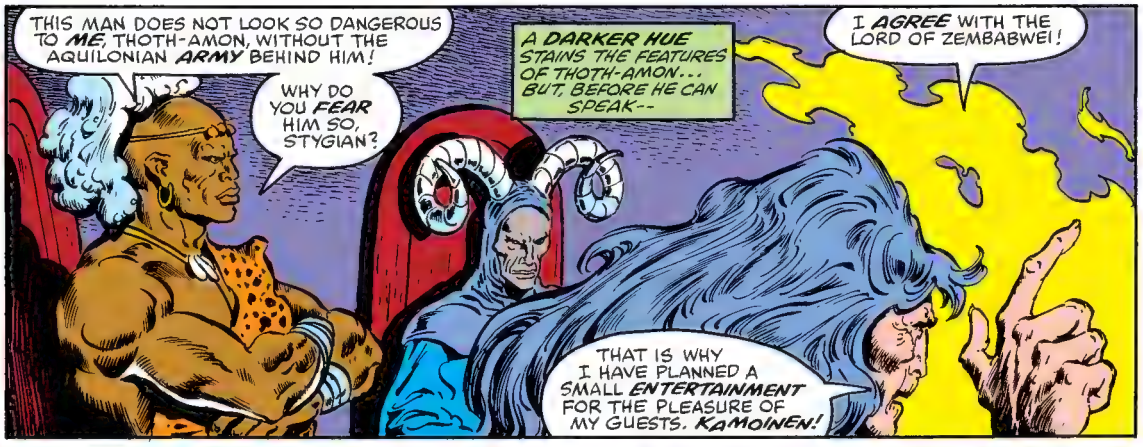

...WHERE CONAN STARES DIRECTLY INTO THE ICY, SHADOWED EYES OF THOTH-AMON OF STYGIA, WHO SPEAKS TO HIM IN HEAVILY ACCENTED AQUILONIAN:
SO, WE MEET AGAIN, DOG OF A CIMMERIAN WHO HAS BECOME A KING!

CONAN'S ANSWER IS FAR BRIEFER...AND EVEN MORE TO THE POINT.
VERY WELL, THEN, IF YOU WILL PLAY THE DEFIANT ONE, LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO THOSE HOSTS YOU DO NOT KNOW...

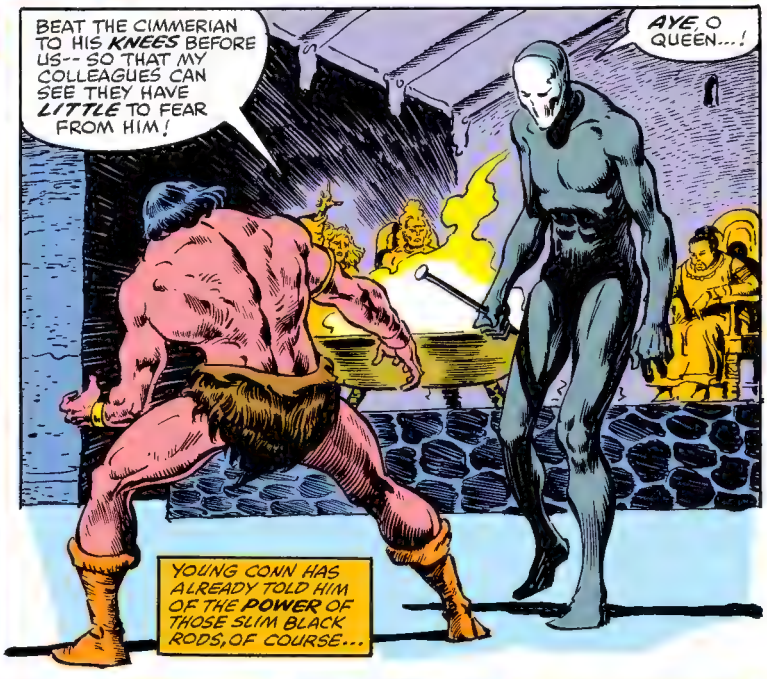

THIS IS THE DIVINE PRA-EUN, LORD OF THE SCARLET CIRCLE... SACRED GOD-KING OF JUNGLE-GIRDED ANGKHOR IN THE REMOTE EAST.
THE SO-GREAT KING OF AQUILONIA AND I ARE OLD FRIENDS... THOUGH HE KNOWS ME NOT.
HE ONCE DID ME THE KINDEST OF FAVORS.
OH? I KNOW NOT THIS TALE, PRA-EUN.

BUT YES! JUST OVER A DECADE AGO, HE DID TO DEATH THE FORMIDABLE YAH CHIENG, SORCERER OF KHITAI-- MY GREATEST RIVAL.
HAD HE NOT SLAIN YAH CHIENG, I SHOULD NOT TODAY BE THE SUPREME MASTER OF THE SCARLET CIRCLE.
I AM MOST BEHOLDEN TO THE BRAVE MONARCH OF AQUILONIA.
BUT THERE IS NO WARMTH IN THE EASTERNER'S VOICE...

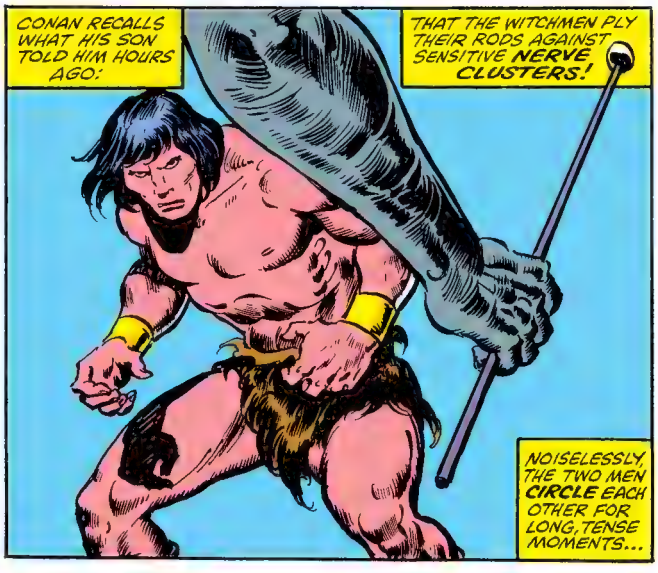
...AND THOTH-AMON CONTINUES:
THIS, CIMMERIAN, IS THE GREAT SHAMAN NENAUNIR, PROPHET AND HIGH PRIEST OF DAMBALLAH-- AS HIS PEOPLE CALL FATHER SET-- IN FAR OFF ZEMBABWEI.
AT ONE WORD FROM NENAUNIR, THREE MILLION BLACKS WILL ARISE-- TO STEEP ALL THE WORLD SOUTH OF KUSH WITH FLAME AND BLOOD!


THIS MAN DOES NOT LOOK SO DANGEROUS TO ME, THOTH-AMON, WITHOUT THE AQUILONIAN ARMY BEHIND HIM!
WHY DO YOU FEAR HIM SO, STYGIAN?
A DARKER HUE STAINS THE FEATURES OF THOTH-AMON... BUT, BEFORE HE CAN SPEAK--
I AGREE WITH THE LORD OF ZEMBABWEI!
THAT IS WHY I HAVE PLANNED A SMALL ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE PLEASURE OF MY GUESTS. KAMOINEN!

AT LOUHI'S BIDDING, ONE OF THE WITCHMEN STEPS FORTH...
YOU HAVE BUT TO COMMAND, O AVATAR OF THE WHITE HAND!

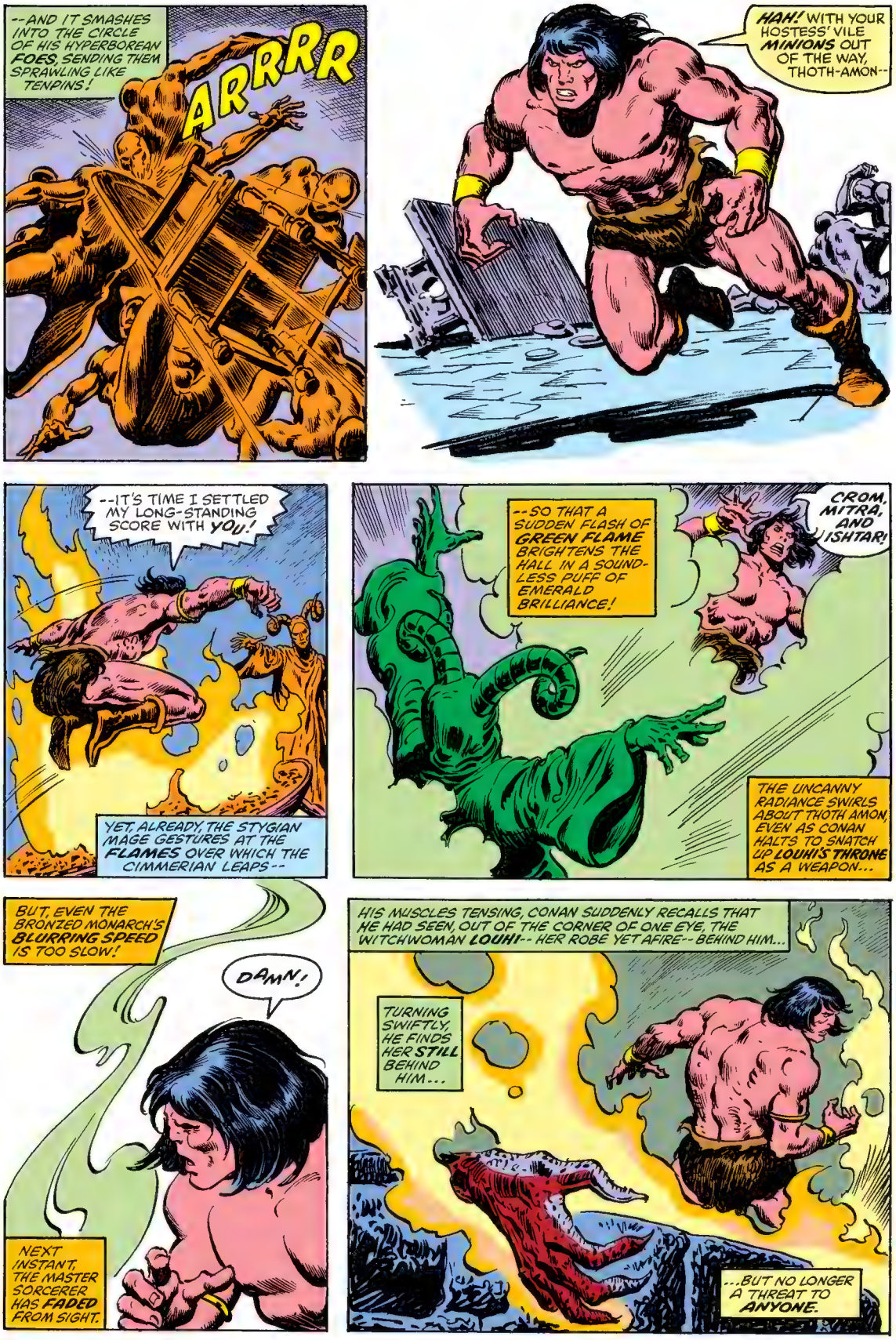

BEAT THE CIMMERIAN TO HIS KNEES BEFORE US-- SO THAT MY COLLEAGUES CAN SEE THEY HAVE LITTLE TO FEAR FROM HIM!
AYE, O QUEEN...!
YOUNG CONN HAS ALREADY TOLD HIM OF THE POWER OF THOSE SLIM BLACK RODS, OF COURSE...

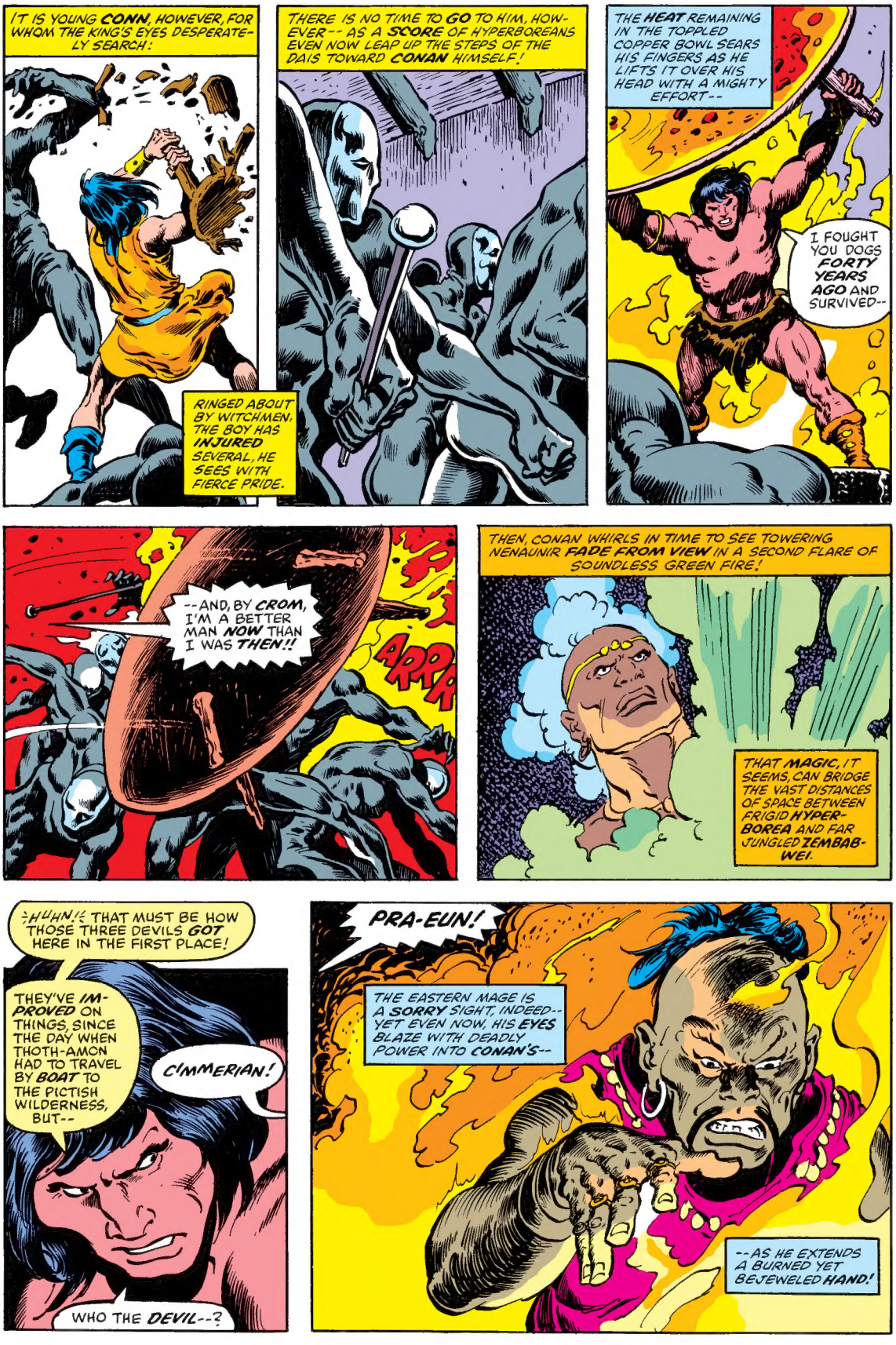
YET NOW, SUDDENLY, BURSTING FREE, THE BOY CRIES OUT IN CIMMERIAN-- WHICH ONLY HE AND HIS SIRE UNDERSTAND--!
FATHER! REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU ABOUT HOW THEIR WITCH-RODS WORK!
THEN, THIN STRONG FINGERS PULL THE LAD BACK.

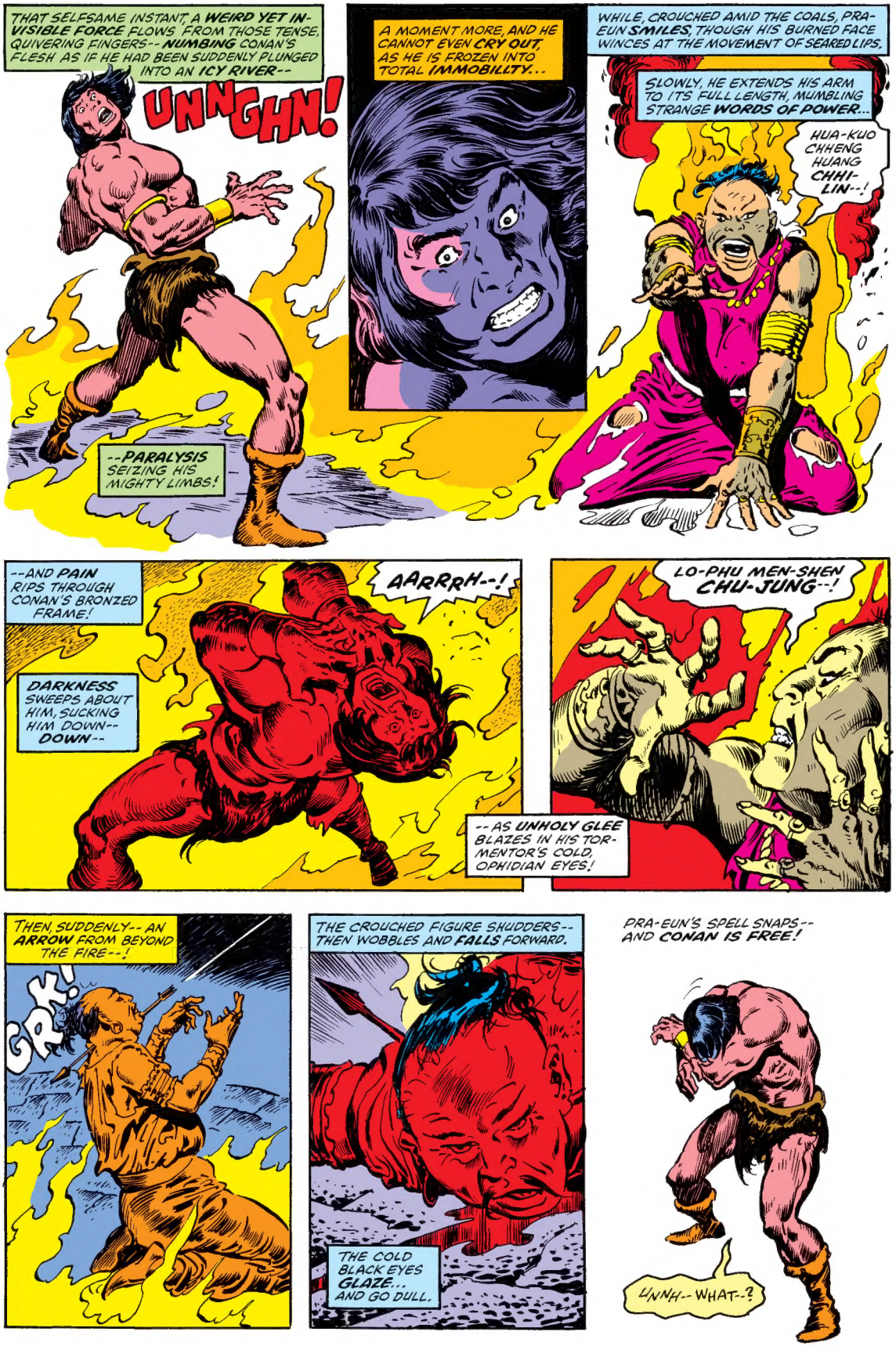

CONAN RECALLS WHAT HIS SON TOLD HIM HOURS AGO:
THAT THE WITCHMEN PLY THEIR RODS AGAINST SENSITIVE NERVE CLUSTERS!
NOISELESSLY, THE TWO MEN CIRCLE EACH OTHER FOR LONG, TENSE MOMENTS...

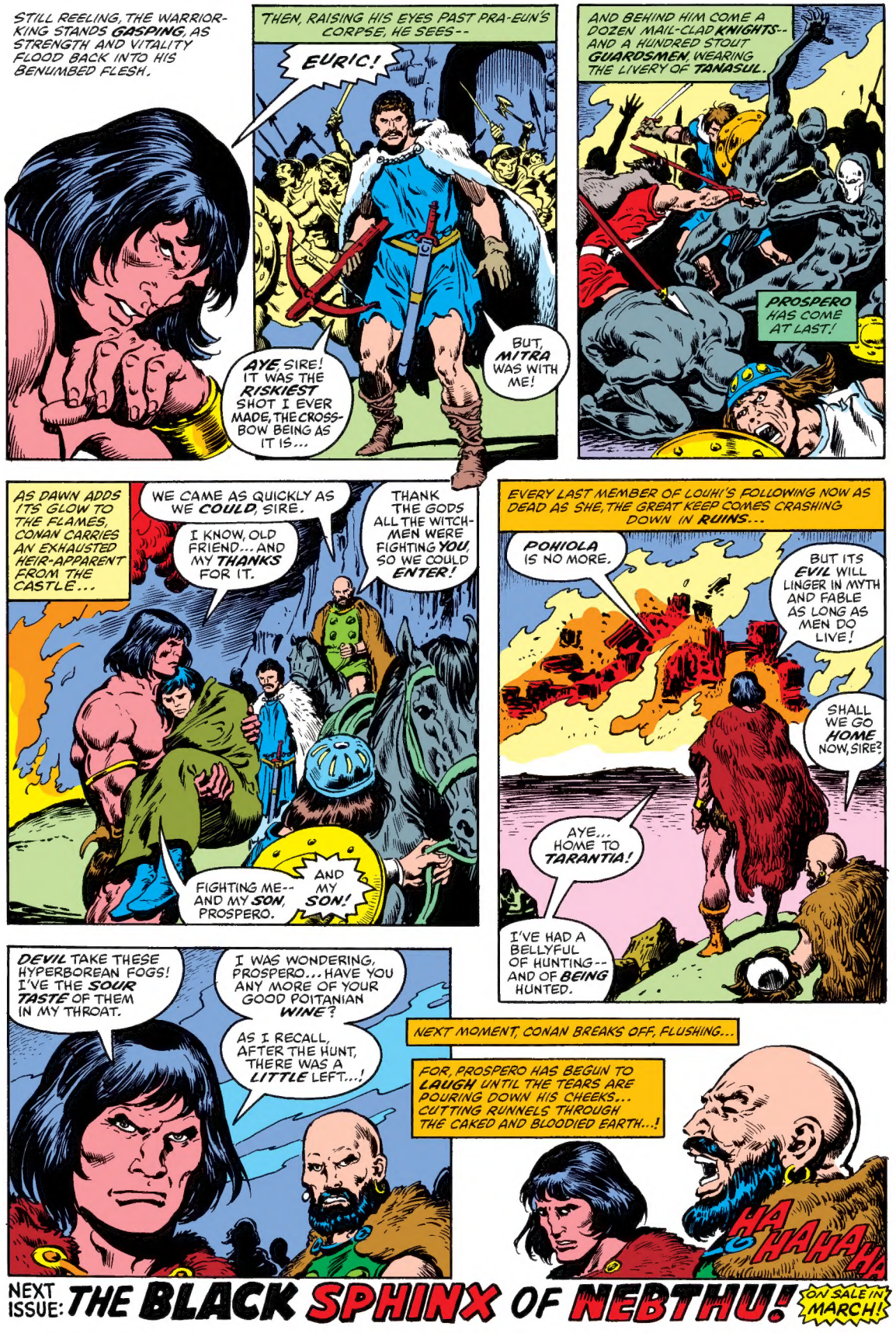
THEN, AS CONAN SEEMS TO LOWER HIS GUARD FOR AN INSTANT, HIS OPPONENT LEAPS TO THE BAIT!
AS THE ONCE-BARBARIAN SMASHES HIS FOE WITH AN IRON FIST, THE POWER-ROD SCARCELY GRAZES HIS LEFT SHOULDER--
ARRF!
YET, IT SENDS A BOLT OF PAIN LANCING THROUGH HIS BODY!
UNNHH!
HERE, LOUHI! MY KNEES ARE BENT, RIGHT ENOUGH--
--BUT ONLY SO THAT I MAKE BETTER USE OF YOUR PALE-HAIRED, BLOODLESS WORSHIPPER--
--THAN HE HAS EVER SEEN BEFORE!
AAAAA
AS THE FLAILING FIGURE HITS THE HUGE COPPER BOWL, IT GOES OVER WITH A NOISY CLANG--
--AND THE NEXT SOUND HEARD IN THE VAST HALL IS THE SCREAMING OF LOUHI, AS HER WHITE ROBES SUDDENLY BURST AFLAME!
AAIEEE

LOOK OUT, PRA-EUN! THE COALS--!
IN HIS CLUMSY HASTE TO FLEE, HOWEVER, THE SMALLER MAN KNOCKS OVER HIS OWN THRONE--
AAAGGG
--TRIPPING ACROSS ITS LEGS, TO FALL INTO THE PUDDLE OF FIRE!
NOW, AT LAST, THE WITCH-MEN ACT--
UGKK
--BUT THEY ARE TOO LATE!
NOR HAS CONAN TUTORED HIS SON FOR NAUGHT IN THE ART OF ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE...
UNNH
...USING ALL WEAPONS AT HIS DISPOSAL!
MMFF
AND, IN A SEQUENCE OF TEN SECONDS, HE FELLS FOUR MEN WITH A WOODEN STOOL...!
THEN COMES THE WAR-CRY OF NENAUNIR--
SHAKA-LAI!!
A HEAVY WOODEN THRONE-CHAIR IS LIFTED AND HURLED BY THE SHAMAN OF ZEMBABWEI--
BUT, CONAN DODGES IT WITH A STILL-PANTHERISH AGILITY--


--AND IT SMASHES INTO THE CIRCLE OF HIS HYPERBOREAN FOES, SENDING THEM SPRAWLING LIKE TENPINS!
ARRRR
HAH! WITH YOUR HOSTESS' VILE MINIONS OUT OF THE WAY, THOTH-AMON--
--IT'S TIME I SETTLED MY LONG-STANDING SCORE WITH YOU!
YET, ALREADY, THE STYGIAN MAGE GESTURES AT THE FLAMES OVER WHICH THE CIMMERIAN LEAPS--
--SO THAT A SUDDEN FLASH OF GREEN FLAME BRIGHTENS THE HALL IN A SOUNDLESS PUFF OF EMERALD BRILLIANCE!
CROM, MITRA, AND ISHTAR!
THE UNCANNY RADIANCE SWIRLS ABOUT THOTH AMON, EVEN AS CONAN HALTS TO SNATCH UP LOUHI'S THRONE AS A WEAPON...
BUT, EVEN THE BRONZED MONARCH'S BLURRING SPEED IS TOO SLOW!
DAMN!
NEXT INSTANT, THE MASTER SORCERER HAS FADED FROM SIGHT.
HIS MUSCLES TENSING, CONAN SUDDENLY RECALLS THAT HE HAD SEEN, OUT OF THE CORNER OF ONE EYE, THE WITCHWOMAN LOUHI-- HER ROBE YET AFIRE-- BEHIND HIM...
TURNING SWIFTLY, HE FINDS HER STILL BEHIND HIM...
...BUT NO LONGER A THREAT TO ANYONE.


IT IS YOUNG CONN, HOWEVER, FOR WHOM THE KING'S EYES DESPERATELY SEARCH:
RINGED ABOUT BY WITCHMEN, THE BOY HAS INJURED SEVERAL, HE SEES WITH FIERCE PRIDE.
THERE IS NO TIME TO GO TO HIM, HOWEVER -- AS A SCORE OF HYPERBOREANS EVEN NOW LEAP UP THE STEPS OF THE DAIS TOWARD CONAN HIMSELF!
THE HEAT REMAINING IN THE TOPPLED COPPER BOWL SEARS HIS FINGERS AS HE LIFTS IT OVER HIS HEAD WITH A MIGHTY EFFORT--
I FOUGHT YOU DOGS FORTY YEARS AGO AND SURVIVED--
--AND, BY CROM, I'M A BETTER MAN NOW THAN I WAS THEN!!
ARRR
THEN, CONAN WHIRLS IN TIME TO SEE TOWERING NENAUNIR FADE FROM VIEW IN A SECOND FLARE OF SOUNDLESS GREEN FIRE!
THAT MAGIC, IT SEEMS, CAN BRIDGE THE VAST DISTANCES OF SPACE BETWEEN FRIGID HYPERBOREA AND FAR JUNGLED ZEMBABWEI.
:HUHN!: THAT MUST BE HOW THOSE THREE DEVILS GOT HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!
THEY'VE IMPROVED ON THINGS, SINCE THE DAY WHEN THOTH-AMON HAD TO TRAVEL BY BOAT TO THE PICTISH WILDERNESS, BUT--
C'IMMERIAN!
WHO THE DEVIL--?
PRA-EUN!
THE EASTERN MAGE IS A SORRY SIGHT, INDEED-- YET EVEN NOW, HIS EYES BLAZE WITH DEADLY POWER INTO CONAN'S--
--AS HE EXTENDS A BURNED YET BEJEWELED HAND!


THAT SELFSAME INSTANT, A WEIRD YET INVISIBLE FORCE FLOWS FROM THOSE TENSE, QUIVERING FINGERS-- NUMBING CONAN'S FLESH AS IF HE HAD BEEN SUDDENLY PLUNGED INTO AN ICY RIVER--
UNNGHN!
--PARALYSIS SEIZING HIS MIGHTY LIMBS!
A MOMENT MORE, AND HE CANNOT EVEN CRY OUT, AS HE IS FROZEN INTO TOTAL IMMOBILITY...
WHILE, CROUCHED AMID THE COALS, PRA-EUN SMILES, THOUGH HIS BURNED FACE WINCES AT THE MOVEMENT OF SEARED LIPS.
SLOWLY, HE EXTENDS HIS ARM TO ITS FULL LENGTH, MUMBLING STRANGE WORDS OF POWER...
HUA-KUO CH'HENG HUANG CHHI-LIN--!
--AND PAIN RIPS THROUGH CONAN'S BRONZED FRAME!
AARRRH--!
DARKNESS SWEEPS ABOUT HIM, SUCKING HIM DOWN-- DOWN--
LO-PHU MEN-SHEN CHU-JUNG--!
--AS UNHOLY GLEE BLAZES IN HIS TORMENTOR'S COLD, OPHIDIAN EYES!
THEN, SUDDENLY-- AN ARROW FROM BEYOND THE FIRE--!
GRK!
THE CROUCHED FIGURE SHUDDERS-- THEN WOBBLES AND FALLS FORWARD.
THE COLD BLACK EYES GLAZE... AND GO DULL.
PRA-EUN'S SPELL SNAPS-- AND CONAN IS FREE!
UNNH-- WHAT--?


STILL REELING, THE WARRIOR-KING STANDS GASPING, AS STRENGTH AND VITALITY FLOOD BACK INTO HIS BENUMBED FLESH.
THEN, RAISING HIS EYES PAST PRA-EUN'S CORPSE, HE SEES--
EURIC!
AYE, SIRE! IT WAS THE RISKIEST SHOT I EVER MADE, THE CROSS-BOW BEING AS IT IS...
BUT, MITRA WAS WITH ME!
AND BEHIND HIM COME A DOZEN MAIL-CLAD KNIGHTS-- AND A HUNDRED STOUT GUARDSMEN, WEARING THE LIVERY OF TANASUL.
PROSPERO HAS COME AT LAST!
AS DAWN ADDS ITS GLOW TO THE FLAMES, CONAN CARRIES AN EXHAUSTED HEIR-APPARENT FROM THE CASTLE...
WE CAME AS QUICKLY AS WE COULD, SIRE.
I KNOW, OLD FRIEND... AND MY THANKS FOR IT.
THANK THE GODS ALL THE WITCH-MEN WERE FIGHTING YOU, SO WE COULD ENTER!
FIGHTING ME-- AND MY SON, PROSPERO.
AND MY SON!
EVERY LAST MEMBER OF LOUHI'S FOLLOWING NOW AS DEAD AS SHE, THE GREAT KEEP COMES CRASHING DOWN IN RUINS...
POHIOLA IS NO MORE.
BUT ITS EVIL WILL LINGER IN MYTH AND FABLE AS LONG AS MEN DO LIVE!
SHALL WE GO HOME NOW, SIRE?
AYE... HOME TO TARANTIA!
I'VE HAD A BELLYFUL OF HUNTING-- AND OF BEING HUNTED.
DEVIL TAKE THESE HYPERBOREAN FOGS! I'VE THE SOUR TASTE OF THEM IN MY THROAT.
I WAS WONDERING, PROSPERO... HAVE YOU ANY MORE OF YOUR GOOD POITANIAN WINE?
AS I RECALL, AFTER THE HUNT, THERE WAS A LITTLE LEFT...!
NEXT MOMENT, CONAN BREAKS OFF, FLUSHING...
FOR, PROSPERO HAS BEGUN TO LAUGH UNTIL THE TEARS ARE POURING DOWN HIS CHEEKS... CUTTING RUNNELS THROUGH THE CAKED AND BLOODIED EARTH...!
HA HA HA HA
NEXT ISSUE: THE BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU!
ON SALE IN MARCH!

THE MAKING OF KING CONAN, 1932-1980

by Roy Thomas

Stop me if you've heard this one before. Or rather, just go back and (hopefully) savor "The Witch of the Mists" again. This one's for the newcomers among ye.

Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan, wrote nearly two dozen adventures of the swashbuckling Cimmerian during the 1930's, recording (though in no particular order) the barbarian's slow and checkered rise to kingship.

But, when Conan announced at the end of the novel-length *Conan the Conqueror* (see SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN #10) that he intended to make the Nemedian Harem girl Zenobia his bride and thus the queen of Aquilonia, he was making what amounted to his farewell speech — at least as written by REH himself.

Howard revealed, in letters to friends and fans, that Conan reigned as king for many years, that he fought various "defensive wars," and that he did some exploratory voyaging on the Western Ocean. But that's about it. He never even revealed in so many words if King Conan kept his word about marrying Zenobia — though it's safe to assume he meant what he said.

In the years since Howard's untimely death in 1936, however, several other writers have added to the more-or-less official canon. About a year back, for instance, noted fantasy authors L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter wrote *Conan the Liberator,* a novel which tells how, as they see it, Conan became king of Aquilonia, slaying the evil King Numedides on his throne. And we ourselves, in the 1978 and 1979 CONAN ANNUALS, have told of how Conan retrieved and wedded the lovely Zenobia.

Most importantly for our purposes here, though: In 1957, Björn Nyberg and de Camp wrote a novel eventually known as *Conan the Avenger,* which occurs about a year after Conan's marriage and has the Cimmerian off on a quest to rescue his abducted queen from vile sorcerers and the like. What happened during the next few years is, as of yet, unrecorded.

However, in the late 1970's, de Camp and Carter wrote a series of short stories which dealt with King Conan and his son (also named Conan, but usually called Prince Conn) locked in final battle with the wizardry of Thoth-Amon and his minions. These tales were eventually collected in the paperback volume *Conan of Aquilonia.*

Some months back, it seemed to me the time was ripe to adapt these stories — yet somehow, they didn't seem quite right for SAVAGE SWORD. Stan Lee and Jim Shooter agreed with me that Marvel should begin a new double-size color comic titled KING CONAN — definitely one of the few comic-mags ever to star a mortal hero who's pushing sixty years of age.

We left the de Camp/Carter stories more or less intact, though we opted for leaving King Conan bereft of the graying beard and moustache his prose authors gave him. Artistically-inclined readers may pencil these onto the printed pages, if they wish. And we'll be interested in hearing if you agreed or disagreed with that decision on Ye Editor's part.

Meanwhile, as to where we'll go with KING CONAN #5 and beyond — well, stick around for the next year, and you'll see, okay? Who knows? There may yet be a comic-mag called THE SON OF CONAN!